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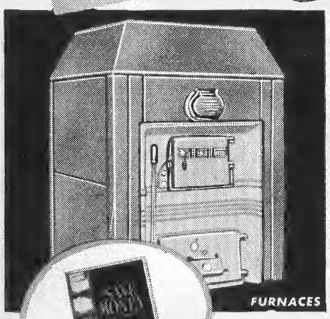
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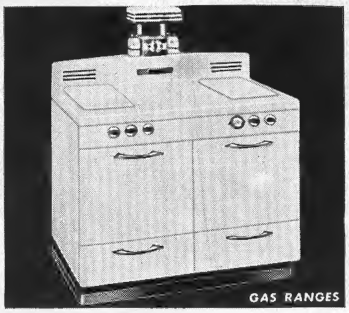
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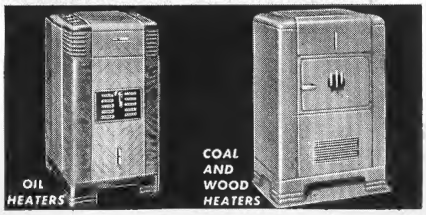

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JULY ISSUE ON SALE MAY 10th

HORROR STORIES

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Dot Cooper came to Boston to visit her sister, Grace. She could not know that even then, Grace was undergoing the bloody ministrations of Satan's Seamstress . . . and that she, herself, was soon to become a member of that ghastly household, the plaything of a mad monster—while the life-blood flowed unceasingly from the veins of the only man who could help her!

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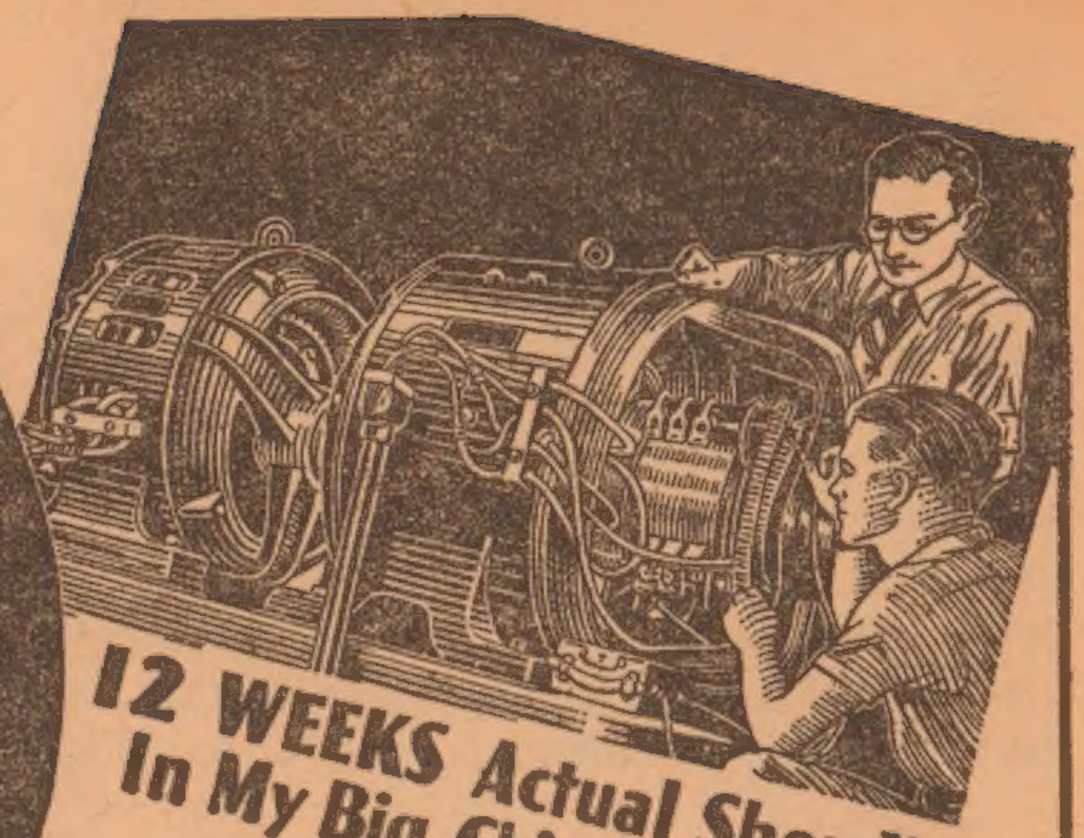

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HORROR IN OUR TIME

THERE is one thing of which we are continually reminded when we read our daily papers. The Dark Ages have not passed. All the strange beliefs, the weird superstitions of ancient days, are with us yet. And with the passage of time, they have grown even stranger, more grotesque—and infinitely more horrible. We do not like to believe that in the midst of what we fondly regard as our enlightened era, there could still exist strongholds of voodooism and devil worshippers. But when we are faced with the facts, it would be criminal negligence to ignore them. Only by exposing these evils can we hope to overcome them.

The practice of Voodoo, originally, was a ritual of deep religious significance to those who believed in it. But gradually it lost its spiritual aspect and became an outlet for the degenerate and sadistic impulses of the human animal, both black and white. The Satanists, of course, never had even the frailest pretense of religion, but another sect, equally as horrible, was a development of the so-called "Christian Inquisition." This was the "Penitentes," who originally believed that the soul could be purged of sin by self-torture. Now, when we read of this cult, it is only to hear of practices so vile as to be almost incredible. These are only a few of the fantastic cults and sects that sporadically break into the front pages of our newspapers.

Recently we learned of a man whose experience vividly illustrates the dangers this situation potentially holds for all of us. This man, whom we shall call Mr. Smith, was motoring with his wife and eleven-year-old daughter through one of the Southwestern states. It was dusk and, attempting to take a short-cut through back roads, he had lost his way. It was a desolate section of the country and some time passed before Mr. Smith came to a house that seemed inhabited. He stopped his car and got out to ask directions.

The door of the house was opened to his knock by an aged crone of repulsive appearance. But her voice was cordial as she asked him and his family to have a bite to eat before they continued on their way. Mr. Smith accepted gratefully, and shortly he, his wife and daughter were seated before a table whose heavy burden of food seemed oddly out of place in the apparently poverty-stricken household.

The last thing Mr. Smith remembered was hearing the old crone moving behind his chair, and seeing a sudden look of fear flash across his wife's face. Then something crashed down on his head and blackness enveloped him.

As Mr. Smith tells the story, everything that happened afterward, he recalls only vaguely, as if in a dream. But he does know that it was some hours later when he recovered partial consciousness. He was lying in one corner of a large room, where, apparently, he had been dragged and left for dead. His wife was beside him, her clothes torn and almost stripped from her body. The side of her head was crushed in. Somehow Mr. Smith managed to get to his feet and he moved dazedly towards a doorway, from beyond which came the sound of drunken revelry intermingled with childish screams of agony.

The ghastly scene which greeted Mr. Smith's eyes as he looked in the next room was one which can never be erased from his mind.

Eight or ten men and women, all past middle-age, were gathered about a long table upon which was stretched Mr. Smith's young daughter. Two of the men were holding her down, while the crone who had seemed so hospitable held a long knife and was carving the tender young body with sadistic artistry.

Mr. Smith does not remember how he got out of the house or what he did next. He was picked up on the outskirts of a near-by city, raving incoherently of what had happened. No one believed him—especially as the experience had so blanked his mind that he could not describe the location of the house. It was many months before he was able to leave the hospital into which he was brought, and it was three years before he arrived in New York, destitute and still half-insane, blabbering his story to anyone willing to listen. . . .

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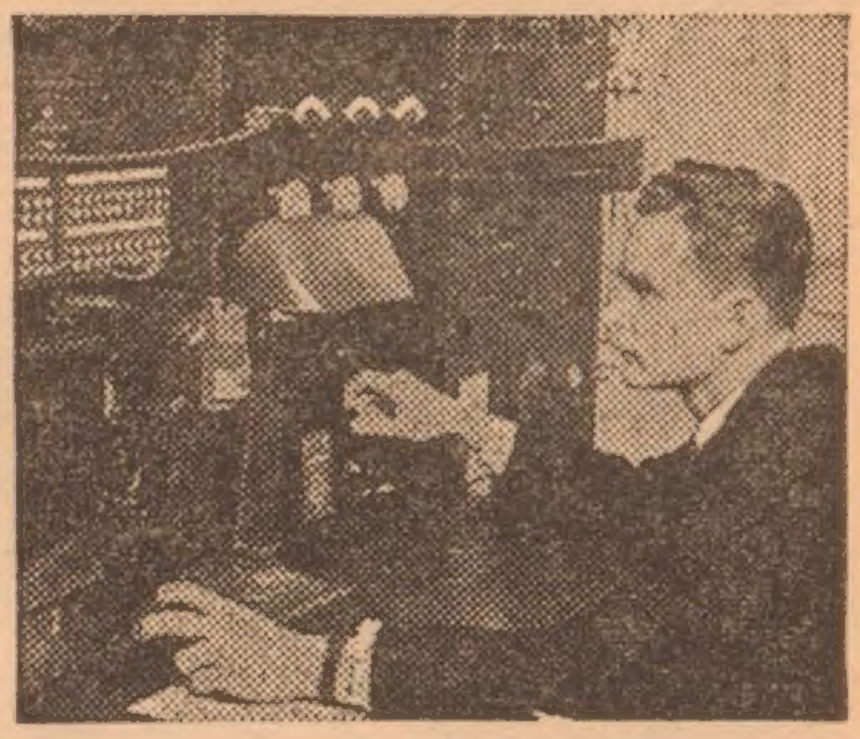

Jobs Like These Go to Men Who Know Radio

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, technicians and pay well for trained men. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, servicemen in good pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Radio jobbers and dealers employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio; loudspeaker systems, electronic devices, are newer fields offering good opportunities to qualified men. And my Course includes Television, which promises to open many good jobs soon.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio is already one of the country's large industries even though it is still young and growing. The arrival of Television, the use of Radio principles in industry, are but a few of many recent Radio developments. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs, etc. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use and thousands more are being sold every day. In every branch Radio is offering more opportunities—opportunities for which I give you the required knowledge of Radio at home in your spare time. Yes, the few hundred $30, $40, $50 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands.

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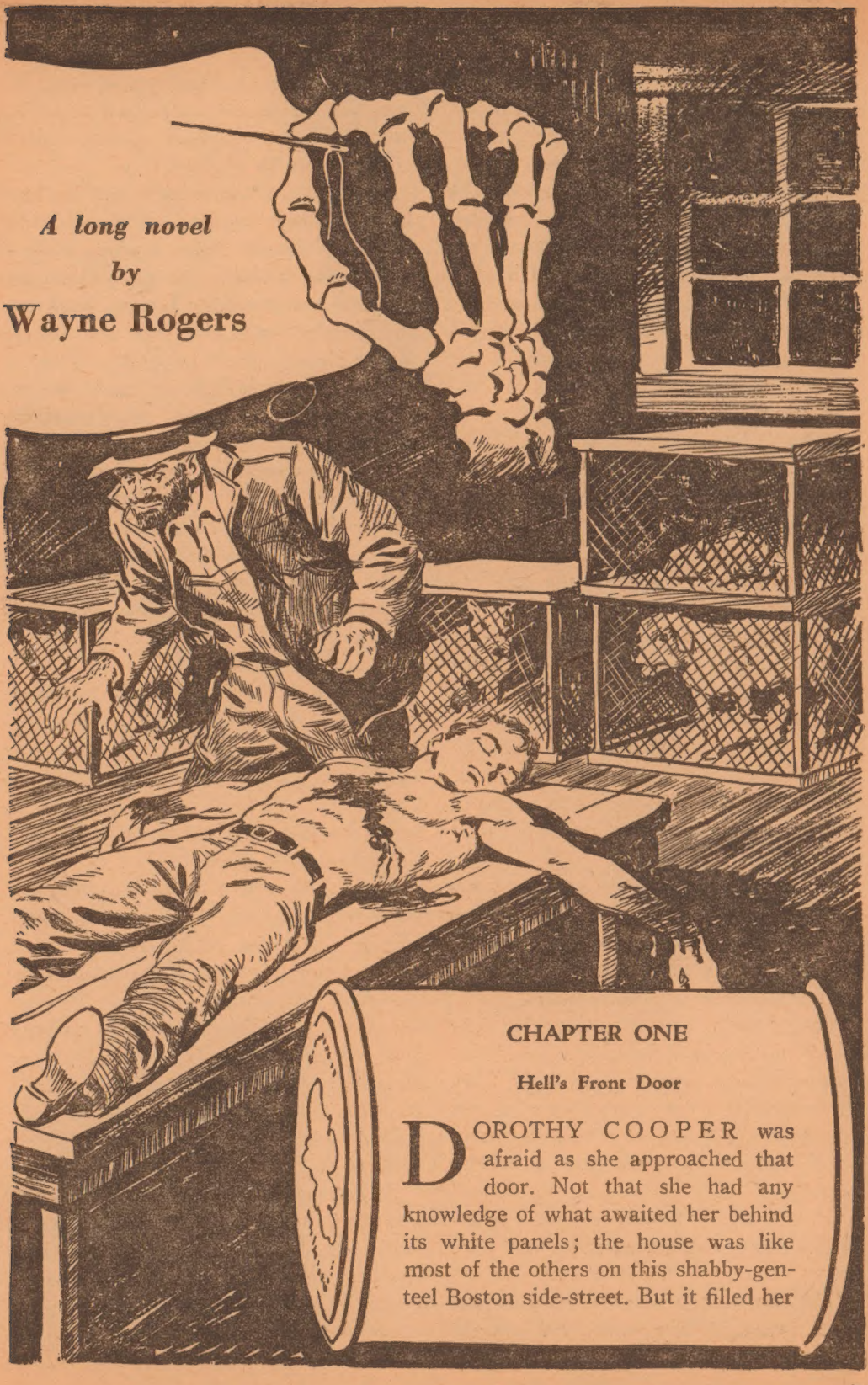
A long novel

by

Wayne Rogers



CHAPTER ONE

Hell's Front Door

DOROTHY COOPER was afraid as she approached that door. Not that she had any knowledge of what awaited her behind its white panels; the house was like most of the others on this shabby-genteel Boston side-street. But it filled her

with the strange awe a big city has for a country girl thrust into it alone and friendless.

Dorothy had been in Boston before, but until a week ago, the borders of New Hampshire had comprised her immediate world. That world had come to an end with the death of her widowed mother. Her last tie with her home town severed, she had turned to her only living relative —Grace Metcalf, her cousin and slightly her senior, who had been living for several years in the Massachusetts metropolis.

By all means come to Boston, Grace had promptly replied to her timorous, half-framed suggestion; and now Dorothy was here.

Nervously she consulted the letter in her handbag, although the address was etched indelibly in her memory. Yes, of course, she was right. This was the house —this inauspicious looking four-story, red-brick building, with the none-too-white Colonial doorway. Her troubled eyes scanned the weatherbeaten facade doubtfully; then resolutely she banished her timidity and went up the steps, rang the bell.

It was not Grace who answered the door. It was an elderly woman, buxom and red-haired, whose broad face twisted into an all-enveloping grin the moment she heard Grace Metcalf's name.

"Oh, you're Dorothy Cooper!" she beamed, as she held the door wide. "New Hampshire you come from, ain't it? Took you most of the day to get here, eh? You must be all in, eh? Well, I been expecting you. I've got a snack all ready to set out for you—"

"But Grace?" Dorothy managed to interrupt with a half-voiced question. "Isn't she—"

"No, she ain't here now," the woman cut in bruskly. "She waited for you till about an hour ago. Then she hadda go out—but I told her I'd look after you. I got a room all fixed up for you. I'll take you up after you've had a bite to put some color in your cheeks. You're peaked; pale as a ghost—"

Critically her slately grey eyes searched Dorothy's face, dropped lower and inventoried her slender figure appreciatively—and in that moment the girl's timid uneasiness unaccountably became stark terror. Suddenly she knew that she did not like this coarse-featured woman with her mop of inexpertly hennaed hair; that she did not like this stuffy, unused-looking sitting room. Something about it gave her the creeps; something about the silence of the place—silence that was vaguely haunted by half-audible sounds. The swish of clothing? The whisper of voices? She could not be sure, and yet she felt that hidden eyes were watching her every movement.

SHE wanted to get up and run from that house—but where could she go? Except for Grace she had no contact in the whole city. She would be lost, would not know where to turn, if she managed to reach the door and get out into the twilight-shadowed street.

Because she could do nothing else, she followed the woman through a short hallway into a dining room, took a seat at one end of a big table and nibbled at the food that was placed before her. Protests that she was not hungry were of no avail. The woman sat over her like a jailer as she made a half-hearted meal and washed it down with tea from a cup that was refilled the moment she had partly emptied it.

At last that interminable meal was over, and she followed her preceptress upstairs, through a corridor of closed doors to a sparsely furnished bedroom; a dreary room that chilled her to the marrow even as she welcomed it as a haven where she could be alone, where she could escape the scrutiny of those probing eyes that

seemed to strip the clothing from her body.

Gratefully she closed the door upon that smirking countenance and instinctively reached below the knob to lock it—but there was no key. Again inexplicable dread crept over her. Involuntarily she backed up against the door as if to brace her feet and hold it closed with her body as she surveyed the dismal chamber. A bed, a bureau, a chair, a table with a lamp upon it, a drab and meaningless picture upon the wall—that was all. Except a single, curtained window. A window—

Eagerly she sped over to it—and abruptly her half-formed hopes were extinguished. The third-floor window opened on a little paved court. It faced the unbroken brick wall of the building next door. There was no escape in that direction, no hope of attracting attention or calling for help.

Help. . . . But she did not need help. This was the address Grace had given her. Before long Grace would be home, and then it would be all right; then somehow they would get out of this distasteful place. . . .

Suddenly she realized that she was trembling, that her hands and arms were wet with perspiration. And that she was very, very tired. It felt good to sit down on the bed, to lie back on it. Her eyes were heavy, were closing—but before she gave way to her fatigue she got to her feet and carried the lone chair to the door, propped it on two legs beneath the knob. The moment she shuffed her shoes off her feet, her eyelids closed and the lights faded into nothingness. . . .

It was the touch of alien fingers on her body that stirred her out of that sleep. Through half-opened eyes she glimpsed the dark, olive-hued face that bent over her, glimpsed the gleaming eyes that stared down at her hungrily—as the man's fingers dug into her naked shoulder.

Wildily startled, her gaze flashed down to her body—and she saw that she wore only her step-ins and brassiere beneath a sleazy negligee. This fellow with the gleaming eyes and the parted lips was already fumbling at the fastenings of the negligee!

That much she saw in a single horrified glance—and in the same instant her eyes, darting past him, saw that the chair was no longer in front of the door; saw that a key was now in the lock!

For a moment terror held her paralyzed. A scream welled up into her throat and choked there, inarticulate. Her body seemed to be a lifeless thing over which she had no control. Horror closed like a vise around her heart and congealed her blood—and then suddenly the spell of immobility snapped. The scream tore from her lips as she sat up and shrank away from those questing fingers.

But instantly a big hand was clapped tightly over her lips and her head was pushed down on the pillow.

"Easy, baby—take it easy!" her foreign-looking attacker warned. "Hollerin' ain't gonna do you no good. Be nice—"

HE WAS bending close over her, his hot lips caressing her shoulder, her neck, clamping tightly against her lips when he snatched his hand away and released her mouth.

Overwhelming horror suddenly gave her frenzied strength.

His clawing fingers raked her flesh as she flung herself out of his grip and sprang to her feet, the tattered remnants of the negligee dropping from her bare shoulders. Wildly she darted toward the door—but he was too quick for her. In a bound he reached it, stood waiting for her, his eager arms held open to receive her. A triumphant smile wreathed his face when she stopped and cast about her vainly seeking a way of escape—and then he started toward her, slowly, inexorably,

with careful steps that hemmed her in and drove her steadily back.

Back to where?

To the window! It was her only chance. At least she could hurl herself through the pane, could dive headlong to the court below. At least she could escape this ravenous beast!

Desperation stilled her panic, enabled her to conceal her purpose until she was almost to her objective, until she dashed her arm through the glass—only to be seized and flung back into the room as he swung in front of her. Blood trickled from her shoulder, where his nails had ripped into the soft flesh. Her breath panted from her open mouth as she picked herself up from the floor where he had flung her; and before she could regain her feet he was upon her, was locking her in his arms, dragging her back to the bed.

What she did then she hardly knew. Like a primitive cave-woman, she fought with hands and feet, with teeth and nails. Her fists beat against his head, but he turned his face away from her and afforded her only the target of his hard skull. Chuckling with evil satisfaction, he half-carried her to the bed, threw her down on it—when her desperately clutching hand fastened on the base of the table lamp.

The lamp was heavy, an old oil lamp that had been wired for electricity. Frantically she wielded it and brought it down upon his head, shattered the round glass globe on his skull and beat him again and again with the heavy base. The jagged shards of glass stabbed into his neck, ripped into his face. Blood spurted from a dozen wounds as he staggered back—and then the heavy bludgeon beat down again and stretched him headlong on the floor.

Still gripping her improvised weapon, Dorothy sprang to the door and turned the key. Dazed with horror, she had only one thought—to escape from that ghastly room. To escape—anywhere, as long as she got away from that horrible, blood-covered creature who was sagging there on his knees, unable to get to his feet.

Out through the doorway she sprang—and instantly was borne back into the room. From the corridor figures leaped upon her. Arms closed around her legs and swept her off her feet. The smashed lamp was torn from her fingers before she could strike out with it. Her arms were seized and pinned behind her back—and in front of her was the henna-haired vixen, her lips drawn back from her gold-filled teeth as she grabbed the girl by the throat and shook her with savage fury.

The woman's face was contorted with rage as she pressed the girl down on the bed, and then something that stung and burned horribly stabbed into Dorothy's neck. For long moments the pain was unbearable. Then gradually it faded, and through her body spread a numbness that deprived her of all feeling. She could see and hear dimly, but she could not move a muscle; could only lie there as a thickening fog closed in around her.

"Damn her—she's a devil!" she heard the woman curse viciously. "Look at this room—and she came within an inch of killing Carlo. I was going to keep her here for a while, but now she's going after her precious cousin. I got no use for trouble-makers like that in my place. The sooner the doc gets her the better. . . .

"Get your car and get her out of here, Hughie," she snapped an order at someone Dorothy could not see. "I'll have her dressed by the time you get back—and by then the stuff'll be working good."

VAGUELY Dorothy was aware that she was being dressed, was being lifted from the bed and carried out of the house to a waiting automobile. She knew that the car was moving, knew that a man

was sitting on the rear seat beside her while another sat at the wheel—but when she tried to speak her jaw dropped open and saliva drooled down her chin. Unbelievingly she heard her own voice gibbering nonsense, heard the cackling, maniacal laugh that dribbled from her lips.

"That's fine, sister," the fellow beside her complimented. "If anybody stops us, you're just another nut on the way to the bughouse!"

Just another nut! Did that mean that her mind had snapped under the harrowing strain? The fellow's terrifying words were burning in her brain as she lost consciousness. She slept. How long, she had no idea; but when she awoke she knew that the car was racing along at a terrific pace, was speeding along a country road. It was the voice of the man beside her that had awakened her.

"Jeez, Hughie, take it easy!" he protested. "What the hell's your hurry? We're almost there—an' these roads ain't meant for no sixties and seventies."

"I got a date, I have," the driver chuckled. "I got a good look at that baby before Marge got her dressed. She's nice. I got a date with her before the doc takes her over."

What was this talk of a doctor to whom she was to be given? A doctor. . . . Terror-maggots crawled through Dorothy Cooper's brain, and she groaned aloud—and suddenly noticed that her voice was again normal. Her jaw no longer sagged open, and that ghastly madness no longer gripped her brain. She was not going to be mad. . . .

Not, at least, until the "doctor" got through with her. . . .

Despite his partner's profane protests, the man at the wheel drove with undiminished speed. Dorothy was bounced from side to side as the car sped around sharp curves—and then, without warning, it happened.

Suddenly the darkness ahead of them was split by a pair of glaring headlights; headlights that abruptly burst into view from around a sharp turn. Hughie was cometing downhill. Too late he realized the danger. He jammed on the brakes. Their shrill squealing drowned his savage cursing—but they could not stop that plummeting speed.

The glaring headlights ballooned up in front of them terrifyingly—and then the world seemed to come to an end in a hollow, reverberating crash that drowned all other sound. A booming crash—and then the rending of metal, the snapping of wood, the bursting of tires, as the car swept from the road and fell over on its side, to roll down a steep hill.

In that split-second before the crash, Dorothy had caught a glimpse of the other car—a car with a long, black, closed body such as undertakers use to transport corpses to the mortuary! Only a glimpse—and then both machines were toppling and rolling over the edge.

Somehow in that crazy descent, Dorthy was flung out of the car. She catapulted wildly through space and then landed with breath-taking force upon something soft—something soft and shockingly cold. Dazed and too shaken to move, she sprawled there, propped up on one hand, in the full glare of a headlight that had miraculously remained lit. For a few moments it blinded her, before she thought to lower her eyes—and then stark, grisly horror stabbed into her consciousness.

There beside her lay a partially shattered coffin. Its occupant had been hurled half-way out of the padded interior and lay on the ground beneath her. In numbing horror she stared down at the ashen-faced corpse of a girl—*of her cousin, Grace Metcalf!*

For long moments no sound came from Dorothy's wide-open mouth. Then her constricted throat relaxed—and a shriek of wild terror jangled from her lips.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Debt

KENNETH DRISCOLL leaned forward in the taxicab and peered out of the window as the blocks flashed past. His square-cornered jaw was hard, his lips clenched so tightly that they made a bloodless line, hardly more than a cicatrice across his grim face. But his hard, icy blue eyes were not registering the passing scene of dark, closed-up store fronts. They were visioning a telephone booth where a man spoke swiftly, desperately, while death swooped down upon him.

"Listen, Ken—this is Frank." The memory of those quick words was sharp and clear in his brain. "Listen hard—my number is up and there's not much time. I'm in a cigar store—" he gave an address in a business neighborhood that would be dark and deserted now at nearly nine o'clock in the evening—"tricked in here by the dope mob I've been trailing.

"They have me trapped and will blast this booth down any second—but I uncovered the rats. It's the Augie Seaman mob. He's been distributing the stuff through his brother's *gar-r-r—*"

The words had ended in a strangled gasp—and with them the life of Kenneth Driscoll's brother, Frank. The moment he had slapped the phone back into its cradle, Ken had dived out of the little office from which he conducted his private detective agency and had raced to the street, to flag the first taxi he found. But his haste was useless; he knew that even as he counted each passing second.

Frank's words had ended in a crash of sound, a crash that almost drowned the gurgling gasp that was his last effort. The drug mob had got him—with even more finality than they had succeeded in getting Kenneth less than a year before. . . .

Driscoll leaped from the cab before the driver could stop. The street was deserted, and a glance told him that the cigar store, a large corner establishment, was dark except for a dim night-light. The door opened when he pressed against it—and even before he strode to the far corner he saw the dark shape that huddled on the floor of the booth.

Frank Driscoll was dead—no doubt about that; horribly dead. The killers had smashed in the booth windows to reach him—and what they had done to him after that made the muscles of Kenneth's stomach tie up in tight knots. They had used knives—knives that had hacked the trapped man to pieces; had slashed his face until it was hardly recognizable and had slit his torso from end to end.

Ken's eyes stared stonily at that gory horror; eyes that saw far beyond the mutilated corpse of his brother. This was the end of the second round in the Driscolls' battle with the dope mob, the second victory for the mobsters—and this was the knockout that was intended to terminate the struggle. . . .

Ten months ago, both Driscolls had been listed on the roll of the Treasury Department's Narcotics Bureau and were stationed in New York. Kenneth and Joe Logan, his partner, had uncovered a lead which promised to run down the mobsters who had been flooding the city with cocaine and opium; a lead that ended in a nasty death-trap for Logan. Ken had escaped that trap—but before the resulting investigation was concluded he wished that he had died with Logan. Not only had the gang murdered Logan, but they had eliminated Ken Driscoll by planting ostensible bribe money in his desk and making it appear that he had been bought off and had let his partner go unwarned to his death.

That had ended Kenneth's career with the T-men. John Rickert, his chief, had broken him; had withheld criminal charges only on Frank Driscoll's plea.

After that Frank had taken up the trail of the dope-runners, a trail which soon was traced into nearly a dozen states and scores of cities. He and his partner, Owen Haller, had been working day and night on the case—and this was the result. Once more the mobsters had wiped out the pursuit when it became too dangerous—and one more of the Driscolls was eliminated, for all time. . . .

ONE—but not both! Frank was dead but Kenneth was still very much alive; and as he looked down at his brother's mangled corpse, grim resolution crystallized in his brain. He was no longer a T-man; now he was only a private investigator—but Frank's telephone message had placed the responsibility squarely on his shoulders, had passed on to him a blood debt that would not be settled until his brother's murder was fully avenged!

Like an automaton he stepped into the blood-spattered booth and took the receiver from the hook, dropped a nickel into the slot and dialed the familiar office number. It was Owen Haller who answered the phone.

"They got Frank!" he gasped the moment he grasped Ken's message. The wire sizzled with his curses, but then he curbed his wrath. "My God—why did he go alone?" he deplored. "I've been sitting here waiting to hear from him, waiting to join him—and he goes in solo! Stay there, Ken—I'll be right over."

But when Owen Haller arrived he could do no more than Kenneth. His large-featured square block of a face drained of color as he stared down at the remains of the man who had been his working mate. His big fists clenched and unclenched, and bitter curses gritted from between his tightly locked teeth.

"The dirty rats got him!" he repeated as if he could not credit his own words. "He told me this morning he was on the trail of something hot—something he had to follow alone—"

"It was the Seaman mob," Ken's words clipped from his lips almost involuntarily. "They got him. They're behind the dope-running. They're pushing it through Augie Seaman's brother's garage—I got that much from Frank over the wire before they shut his mouth. That means Louie Seaman's garage—and that's where I'm going."

"You better let me handle this," Haller warned quickly. "You're not in the service any more. You have no right to mix in.

BIG BOY TAKES A TIP
BOB: Say, fellow, are you taking Ex-Lax? Thought that was for women and kids.
JIM: Wrong, Big Boy! I've been taking Ex-Lax for years. It fixes me up fine!
BOB: Oh yeah! Well, I'm pretty husky . . . I need a laxative with a wallop.
JIM: Don't kid yourself! Ex-Lax tastes good, but it's plenty effective!
LATER
BOB: Thanks for the tip, pal! I tried Ex-Lax and it's great stuff!
JIM: What did I tell you! It's the only laxative we ever use in our family.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX
THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

If Rickert finds out about it, he'll pounce on you sure."

"The hell with Rickert!" Ken spat. "There's all the right I need—" he nodded to the still heap in the blood-spattered booth. "I'm going after those rats."

He had already started as if to leave the store, but Haller's hand reached out and restrained him.

"Okay, Ken—I know how you feel," the Treasury man nodded; "but I'm in this with you—get that. We'll handle this together, even if Rickert busts me when he finds out."

Swiftly they sketched a plan for invading the Seaman garage, but before they had all the details arranged to their satisfaction a car drew up at the curb and John Rickert strode into the store. A short, broad-shouldered man, with a bullet head and a flat-featured face, he came forward with his bulldog jaw thrust out aggressively as he turned hard, suspicious eyes upon them. A glance at the booth was all he needed.

"You, Driscoll—how come you found him here?" he barked. And then, when he had been told about Frank's telephone call, his eyes narrowed even further. "So he called *you,* eh?" His words were almost a sneer. "My men are instructed to report directly to headquarters. Frank knew that—and he always followed orders meticulously."

A score of probing questions he launced at Kenneth, and with each answer his obvious dissatisfaction and suspicion increased. Finally he insisted that Kenneth remain to give his story to the police, while Haller left; but half an hour later the two met at a rendezvous Haller had suggested in a surreptitious whisper.

"All set—I've got a car outside," he greeted as soon as Ken appeared. "The Seaman garage is open—I drove past a few minutes ago. Louie was in his office, and you can count on at least half a dozen of his punks around the place. Once we get inside, we've got to reach that office door before he can get out and yell for help."

KENNETH nodded and took his place at the wheel of the coupe Haller had procured. Around the corner from their garage destination they stopped while he got out and let the air out of a rear tire. Then the car wobbled down the block and turned in at the garage runway, came to a bumping stop ten feet inside the doorway.

A glance at the lighted office, as they passed, revealed Louie Seaman seated at his desk. He seemed to be alone, and the garage appeared to be deserted except for a greasy-overalled mechanic who got up from beneath a car on which he had been working.

Now was the time! Haller opened the door on his side and stepped out, his shielded gun in his hand, while Driscoll slipped out from behind the wheel to inspect the flat tire. His fingers were tight on the automatic in his coat pocket as the mechanic approached—but suddenly he whipped around in quick surprise.

Something was wrong! The heavy steel roll-door was clanging down, closing the garage. At the same moment the main, overhead lights blinked out—just as half a dozen shadowy figures rose up from behind rows of cars. Haller's gun was out and blazing, but he was unprotected by the body of the machine. Kenneth saw him stagger drunkenly forward, saw the automatic drop from his hand as he groaned and pitched to the floor.

It was too late to save Haller, too late to save himself—but it wasn't too late to avenge Frank!

Kenneth's gun whipped out and cracked down over the mechanic's skull. Past the falling body he dived, crouching low, hurling himself at the flimsy door of the office. It crashed under the impact of his

body. The shattered pane of the upper half showered down on him as the catch snapped and the door slammed inward —and in the same split-second his gun roared again and again. A drumfire of bullets that sank into Louie Seaman's body before the gun was knocked out of his hand and he was beaten to the floor.

Two of the Seaman killers had been hidden there in the office, but Kenneth's onslaught had been so swift that it had caught them flat-footed. Now they could only smash vengeful fists into his face as they pinned him helpless on the floor; could only curse and kick at him viciously until another figure strode forward and spat down in his face.

Augie Seaman himself!

"Pick him up. Get him in back," Seaman clipped, while his eyes blazed with seething rage. "Look out for his face. I don't want him marked up. He's not getting his here—a bullet's too good for that skunk. He's going up to the Doc.

"You come looking for trouble, huh?" he snarled at Kenneth. "You're gonna get a bellyful of it, shamus—and I'll see that you're kept alive till the very last moment. You'll beg for a bullet in the guts before you're finished!"

They dragged Driscoll to a tiny room at the rear of the garage and held him down while Seaman jabbed a hypodermic needle into his neck and emptied the syringe barrel into his veins. The potion acted quickly. Kenneth felt his limbs deadening, felt his senses fading—and then thick, soft, smothering blackness closed in upon him. . . .

WHEN he opened his eyes again, it was dusk and he was on the back seat of an automobile that was speeding along a country road. One of the Seaman thugs was sitting beside him, watching him with sardonic amusement, and Augie was at the wheel. There was something evil, something unclean, about that fellow's mocking chuckle; it sent a twinge of nameless fear through Driscoll—fear that was appallingly substantiated when he managed to catch a glimpse of his face in the rear-view mirror.

He hardly recognized himself! His eyes were wild and staring; his mouth hung open, his lower jaw sagging while saliva drooled down his chin and onto his coat. He looked like an imbecile—like the idiots who hang onto the bars of asylum windows!

And when he tried to straighten his face his muscles would not obey the impulses of his frantic brain . . .

The rest of that trip was a nightmare of dread fear and horrible imagining for Kenneth Driscoll. A maniac being taken to an asylum where he would be at the mercy of some fiendish doctor! That terrifying prospect rose up before him every time he emerged from the periodic coma that enveloped him. A helpless maniac—and yet there was something more to it than that; something even more fiendish which he had glimpsed in Augie Seaman's face back there in the garage . . .

Dusk became night. Hours passed. By the sign he glimpsed over a post office he knew that they were far up-state, in the Adirondacks. Once he heard the fellow beside him mutter that it was nearly midnight. Snatches of information registered only superficially on his dazed brain.

It was the cold that awakened him that last time, cold that bit through his light topcoat. He hunched deeper into the corner of the seat for warmth—and discovered that his muscles reacted almost normally! After that he stayed awake, though his eyes remained half-closed; stayed awake and tried to plan desperately, frenziedly—

In the midst of one of those frantic concentrations every thought was wiped from his mind by the booming sound of a thunderous crash. A smash-up! Somewhere close by!

Seaman stepped on the gas and sent the car speeding forward, then quickly jammed on the brakes as they rounded a turn in the downhill road. The car braked to a stop just as a woman's horror-fraught scream keened through the still night. A scream that sliced into Kenneth's brain like a razor-edged knife. There, in the deep gully at one side of the road, was the wreckage of two overturned automobiles.

"They must be from the sanitarium," Seaman exclaimed, as he leaned out and peered down the hill. "No other traffic comes along this road."

His companion stared goggle-eyed at the wreckage. They had forgotten all about Kenneth—and in that momentary negligence gave him the opportunity he had been fervently praying for. Resolutely mustering his strength, he suddenly threw himself upon the fellow; grabbed him around the neck with one arm while his other hand seized the gun he had noticed in a hip holster. Sharply he brought the weapon down on the fellow's skull and then swerved to blaze a shot at Seaman.

That bullet caught the gang leader in the right shoulder and flung him back against the windshield. The gun he had been about to fire dropped from his fingers—and before he could recover it Kenneth Driscoll had leaped out into the night and was pitching blindly down the hill.

CHAPTER THREE

Night of Horror

SHEER horror riveted Dorothy Cooper to the ground. Her muscles were paralyzed, her limbs immobile, as if she were in the midst of a ghastly nightmare. Helplessly she bent over the corpse of her cousin while wild, uncontrollable screams pealed from her throat—until suddenly the lights of another car burst into view.

The squealing of its brakes grated in her ears and shocked her back to full consciousness. More of those inhuman fiends were coming after her, to recapture her and kill her the way they had murdered Grace! The crack of a shot brought her to her feet—and then she saw one of them leap from the car and come plunging toward her!

Her legs trembled so that she could hardly stand, but she ran—ran recklessly, blindly, farther down into the gully and away from the wrecked cars. Now there were more shots behind her. At any moment she expected to feel a bullet driving into her back. Sobs welled from her lips and almost choked her, but she staggered on, stumbling into trees, tearing her way through brush and brambles—going God only knew where!

Anywhere, as long as it was away from those monsters . . .

But she wasn't getting away! They were too many for her. She heard them yelling to one another. Their voices seemed to come from all parts of the valley, and now she heard the pound of footsteps close behind her—footsteps that came steadily closer no matter how she strove to drive her quaking legs onward!

At last she knew that she could not go another step. Her knees were buckling; she was going down—and the pursuit was right behind her. Whimpering and sobbing, she tried to clamber back to her knees—but a hand reached out of the darkness and grabbed her by the shoulder, pulled her to her feet and backed her against a tree.

"Take it easy—I won't hurt you," the fellow said, but she fought him off with her last bit of strength.

Swiftly he pinned her arms at her side, and then she would have fallen if he had not held her up. Now the shouting was louder on all sides; she could hear his companions beating the bushes, trying to

locate this fellow and drag her off to her death.

"Please—please!" she begged frantically. "Oh, *please* let me go! Please—"

"If I let you go they will have you in no time," he snapped. "Do you want to go back to them? If you don't, snap out of your funk and do as I tell you. We've got to run for it."

As he spoke he was urging her forward, was forcing her farther up the valley. Something about his voice was reassuring; something that she recognized as wholesome, kindly, even in her mad panic. As they stepped out of the woods into a little clearing she caught a glimpse of his face in the thin moonlight—a square-jawed face, with a high forehead and a shock of thick, unruly hair. A trustworthy face, intuition whispered—and at that instant she caught sight of the shape that was materializing from a deep patch of darkness just behind him. The moonlight glinted weakly on something shiny—something that was raising—

"No!" she screamed wildly, although it seemed that her tongue was glued to the roof of her mouth—and instinctively she threw herself forward, just as a shot roared thunderously almost in her ear.

A burning sting seared the upper part of her arm; and then she was on the ground, flung there as the ambusher leaped past her and tried to scurry back to cover. Before he could dive into the trees another gun roared and he yelped in agony as he went crashing through the bushes.

"Thanks," that reassuring voice said simply as a hand reached down and helped her to her feet. "That was coming through in the pinch. But we've got to move fast."

THE sound of those shots had located them disastrously. Now the sound of running footsteps seemed to be converging on them from every side. Dorothy did her best to keep up with his stride, but her high heels threatened to trip her at every step. Capture was inevitable, a matter of moments, she knew—when suddenly the faint path they were following debouched into a road; a road that led to a distant clearing where she could see the corner of a hut.

The building she glimpsed only subconsciously. What gripped and held her startled gaze was an old woman who stepped out almost in their immediate path. A thin-faced old woman whose grey hair was brought down tightly on both sides of her head and twisted into a bun at its back. Over her shoulders she wore a dark shawl that reached below her knees and muffled her completely. For a moment she made the startling apparition of a head mounted on an armless, almost shapeless trunk.

"Thank God!" Dorothy's companion muttered; and then he was at the old woman's side, was grasping her by the shoulder.

"This girl is in trouble—desperate trouble," Dorothy heard his swift explanation. "I don't know who you are, but you're a woman—and you can't let those devils get hold of her. You can hide her, can't you? Just hide her away somewhere until they stop hunting for her—and then help her to get out to safety.

"Here—" he fumbled at his belt, and Dorothy glimpsed what looked like a small wad of bills—"take this. It's all I have with me—my emergency cache. It will pay you for your trouble."

The noise of the pursuit was so close from two directions that Dorothy expected to be seized at any moment, but a thin hand came out as if by magic from the folds of the shawl and closed on the bills.

"They won't find her," the old woman said with calm confidence.

"Thanks," he clipped—and before Dorothy could stop him he went blundering off into the darkness with deliberate noise.

Then the thin hand fastened on her arm, urged her forward, and without a word Dorothy was led along an imperceptible trail that seemed to go right through the thickest of the bushes.

The building she had glimpsed was more than a hut, she recognized when they approached it from another direction. It was only one story, but it was a substantial structure that extended back some distance into the surrounding trees. The old woman unlocked the front door to admit her, led the way into a very comfortably furnished living room and then into a small bedroom at its rear. She lit a lamp that stood on a table, and Dorothy saw that the lone window was heavily barred.

"You will be safe here," the woman told her with that same note of implicit confidence. "The light cannot be seen through that storm-window. Nobody will come looking for you. Go to bed and get some rest—and perhaps things will look much brighter in the morning. Meanwhile, I'll see what I can learn and if I can locate your young man."

With that she was gone—and her footsteps were echoed by the click of a lock. To be sure that her guest would not be disturbed she had locked her in her room!

That slight metallic click rang in Dorothy's ears with alarming echoes. Suddenly all the new-found security this building had given her dropped from her and left her tense with fright. The woman had seemed perfectly well intentioned, a calm, self-possessed old lady—but she had locked her in!

Cautiously, moving so carefully that she made hardly a sound, Dorothy went to the window and examined it more closely—and the chill of fear crept farther up her spine. That window was so securely battened down from outside that she could not budge the "storm-window." There was no danger that she would leave in that direction. But there was still another door at the farther end of the room. Slowly she tiptoed her way to it—but just as she was about to grasp the knob her hand stopped in mid-air, frozen there by the voice of the old woman.

"I BROUGHT something nice from home with me tonight—something I will give you if you do as I say," she was saying, slowly and coaxingly, as if she were speaking to a child. "It's in that room—but you must not try to take it until I tell you to. You understand that, Homer? Not until Hetty says that you can. You must not try to go into the room, and you must not let anyone else go in—or come out. You understand?"

The response was a hoarse, animal-like rumble that stood the hair at the nape of Dorothy's neck on end! An indistinguishable rumble that sounded like the mewling of a beast!

A door clicked shut, and in a few minutes silence settled over the house—silence that was broken only by the strange sounds that came from that next room. Dorothy's palms were wet with clammy perspiration as she sank down on the bed and stared at the door. Now she saw that there was a space between its bottom and the floor; not more than a quarter of an inch at one end but more than an inch at the other. Through that aperture came the scraping sounds of someone moving about; came queer, piercing cries and something that sounded like a wet, slobbering chuckle!

Sounds that struck icy terror into her heart as she sat there trying to visualize what could be producing them.

Desperately she tried to sleep; tried to lie down and bury her head in the pillow. But it was no use; she could not sleep while that uncanny noise went on next door. For hours she lay there, wide-eyed and wide-eared, listening to blood-chilling moans and screeches, to agonized yapping

and whimpering—until she thought she must go mad.

But the high-pitched, penetrating squeaks were the worst. They set her nerves on edge and made her cover her ears—squeaks of agony.

And suddenly she knew what occasioned them.

Under the door scampered a mouse that pitched and tossed crazily as it cavorted across the room—a mouse that was blinded and had been skinned halfway back to its tail!

Dorothy smothered the horrified shriek that surged to her lips—and then she tensed with terror. That creature—or whatever it was—in the next room came charging across the floor after the tortured rodent. She heard him drop to the floor and dive unsuccessfully after the captive; saw thick, blood-stained fingers groping along under the door, trying to locate the escaped prey.

Howling with rage, the creature threw his bulk against the door time after time. It shook and rattled, but the stout planks held—until he renewed the attack with a heavy weapon. A huge sledgehammer, she saw, when it came smashing through the splintering panels.

In a few minutes the destruction was complete. The battered remnants of the door sagged from its hinges—and into the bedroom strode a man who was over six feet tall and must have weighed close to two hundred and fifty pounds. His hair was long and touseled; a thin, ragged beard clung to his cheeks and chin, and his eyes were big pools of staring bewilderment.

Pop-eyed and slack-jawed, he hulked there in the doorway, his bloody hands arrested in mid-air in front of him, as he gaped at her.

Dorothy screamed—but the sound that issued from between her ashen lips was like the thin squeak of a tortured mouse!

Instantly it struck a responsive chord in that gaping monster's dull brain. With a rumbling bleat he sprang forward and caught her by the hair before she could fling her body across the bed. Holding her trapped head down against the pillow, he fastened his sticky, blood-gummed fingers in her dress and tore it from her body in shreds. Vainly, she tried to free herself, tried to beat her ineffectual fists into his hairy face.

She writhed there on the bed while the eagerly panting monster looked down upon her, as impervious to her piteous pleas as to the blows he shook off his great head. Hot passion leaped in his big eyes—but not passion for the warm softness of her body; as she stared into those seething orbs, she realized that her sex had no part in his hellish fascination.

To him she was no more than another mouse!

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WITH a mewling gurgle of unholy satisfaction, he lifted her in his great arms as if she were a child and carried her through the doorway into the room beyond—into a room that might have been a fiend's laboratory! A laboratory it appeared at first glance; fitted out with a large operating table and several smaller work benches, with various articles of medical and surgical apparatus that hung from the ceiling and stood in front of the cages that lined three of its walls. But every piece of scientific aparatus had been outraged, had been perverted to the hellish purposes of a demented brain!

Rabbits, cats, dogs, rats, possums, foxes—several scores of animals filled those cages and were crucified and spread-eagled on the racks and in the diabolical torture contraptions he had rigged up. Piteous whines came from a fox that hobbled around on the stumps of legs that had been amputated at the first joint; a barely audible mew issued from the gaping mouth of a cat that was skewered on a long, thin spike; and dying squeaks still sounded from a big rat that had been skinned alive and then tossed into a cage filled with its ravenous fellows!

Gagging horror welled up in Dorothy and nauseated her. Desperately she closed her eyes to shut out the shocking spectacle, but she could not close her ears to the muted symphony of hell that was resounding all around her.

As is she were another of his captive animals, the bloodthirsty brute carried her to one end of the room and dropped her to the floor. Quickly he seized her wrists and tied them together with a long rope that hung down through a pulley attached to the ceiling. Before she realized his intention he had her off her feet, had her swinging in the air, free from the floor, as he drew the rope tight and fastened it to a wall peg.

It was useless to struggle, hopeless to try to free her hands from the tightly bound rope. Limp and half-fainting from dread of what was to come, she dangled there by her wrists, her body turning like a model on display. When she swung around so that she faced him she saw that he had picked up a keen-bladed, blood-smeared knife and was starting toward her.

For a long moment he stopped and looked at her. His eyes dwelt on her full-rounded breasts, on her tenderly curved thighs and slender legs—and in that instant animal desire welled up within him. His fingers loosened on the haft of the knife, almost dropped it back onto the table . . . For an instant—and then the impulse died, smothered by the bloodthirst that swept everything before it.

Dorothy read her doom in his eyes. She saw his grip tighten on the knife, saw him start toward her purposefully—and something snapped in her brain. Like a wild thing caught in a trap, she writhed and kicked, while her transcendent terror burst unchecked from her straining throat.

CHAPTER FOUR

Devil's Delivery

WHETHER or not he had made a mistake in entrusting the girl to that old woman who had suddenly materialized out of nowhere, Kenneth Driscoll did not know; but he had had no alternative. With the pursuers at his heels and closing in from all sides, escape with his almost helpless companion had been out of the question. As soon as the search had flagged he would come back and help get her to safety, he told himself, but now he must lead the human wolf-pack as far from her as possible.

Threshing and floundering through the brush, he baited them after him until they were at least a quarter mile from where he had left the women. Then he lay still in a little covert until those closest to

him were past and he could double back on his trail.

Who was this girl who fled in such terrified panic through the wilderness night? Who were these men from whom she was fleeing? Why was she in such mortal dread of them? Those questions, a hunch told him, tied up with his own transportation to this remote wilderness —and the answers might be found back there in the wreckage at the bottom of the gully.

That was where he headed, but before he reached the overturned cars he spotted other men who had the same destination. The searchers evidently had given up the unsuccessful hunt and were coming back to the scene of the disaster. Half a dozen men were gathered there when he crawled to a vantage point in a clump of bushes. One of the ruined cars, a sedan, seemed to have no interest for them, but they were mightily concerned about the other —an undertaker's corpse-car!

In fact, it was the corpse itself about which they were most solicitous — a corpse they were lifting carefully and putting back into a partially demolished casket!

"Take it easy!" one who seemed to be the head man warned as they dragged the body clear of the wreckage. "Careful you don't spill any of that. It's a wonder there's anything left—the way they must have crashed to smash things up this way."

"It's all right—she came through it in one piece," another announced with patent relief. "Nothing much lost except the car—but that sure is a mess!"

A corpse that had been spilled out of its casket . . . Even the most tenderhearted of men would hardly be so concerned about it—and from what Kenneth could see of these huskies they were anything but sentimentalists. Yet they were far more worried about that casket than about the dead driver who lay on the ground near the overturned car.

That casket contained more than the corpse of a woman, his instinct told him. It contained something of such value that its safety dwarfed into unimportance the loss of the automobile and the death of its driver.

But what was that something?

He would have given a pretty penny for a look into the casket at that moment, but the men who thronged around it were not inviting inspection. They were climbing back to the road with it, carrying it up the valley in the direction Augie Seaman had been driving. The sanitarium Seaman had mentioned must be somewhere up that road; a short distance if they were going to carry the casket instead of waiting for a truck.

Carefully Kenneth backed out of his hiding place and made a swift detour to the road. He reached it at a point some distance beyond the men and raced on ahead of them. Not more than an eighth of a mile from the scene of the accident. the road turned into a private driveway and climbed to where a large, colonial-style building faced its colonnaded front to the valley.

At first glance, the place looked like a private dwelling, but when he came closer he saw that most of the windows were barred. There were lights burning on the lower floor, but he saw no sign of guards or attendants until two men came running from the main doorway and set off at top speed down the road.

CAUTIOUSLY he reconnoitered all sides of the building without seeing anyone else. In the rear, part of the hill had been scooped away to give access to a basement floor that evidently housed a garage and several service rooms. Next to the double doors of the garage was a single one that opened when he tried the

knob and led to a short corridor with doors along one side.

Not a sound broke the heavy stillness of the place as he stepped inside and picked his way along the hallway. The first door opened onto a darkened garage. Although there was space in it for several cars, it was empty except for another undertaker's corpse-car like the one that had been wrecked down the road.

The next door admitted him to what appeared to be a rather meagerly furnished laboratory. A high, enameled, white table stood in the center of the floor, with a smaller serving table beside it. Aside from that, there seemed to be nothing but a closet, several wall-cabinets and a row of small buckets on a shelf beside a large sink. Those buckets had been rinsed, but reddish stains still clung to their sides. Red that had darkened to a deep magenta . . . And there were reddish splashes dried on the wall behind the sink . . .

Reddish stains that were unmistakably human blood!

Kenneth recognized the peculiar, vaguely disquieting odor that had assailed his nostrils the moment he entered the room. Embalming fluid! This must be the sanitarium's mortuary!

Quickly his gaze roved over it—and stopped when he noticed a dozen or more small vials on a lower shelf of the auxiliary table. Curiously he picked one up and unscrewed its cap, poured some of the white powder it contained into the palm of his hand and sniffed it.

Cocaine!

There would be no occasion for using the drug in a mortuary. No occasion for using it in embalming. But hundreds of these little vials could have been shipped out in the casket that was wrecked on the road—and that was handled so carefully by the salvagers!

That startling realization had no more than flashed into his mind when he caught the sound of footsteps, of men's voices. They were coming from the rear, entering the corridor—coming toward the laboratory! It was too late now to escape by means of the room's only door; time only to dart to the closet and step inside, to burrow into its farthest corner behind a curtain of hanging clothes.

Hardly had he frozen into immobility when the closet door opened! Did they know he was hiding there? Were they about to drag him out? Kenneth tensed, gripping the automatic—but framed in the open door he saw the old woman with whom he had entrusted the girl. She had removed her shawl and now she took a white uniform from the closet and closed the door. Closed it only three-quarters of the way.

As soon as she stepped away Kenneth cautiously wormed his way forward so that he could see through the opening.

There were nearly a dozen men in the room. Among them he saw the men who had been carrying the casket, Augie Seaman and his thug, and a small, wizened-faced man in a white uniform—a man the others addressed as Dr. Wenzel. Besides the coffin, which lay on the floor at the far end of the room, they had brought in the body of the dead driver; had placed it on the enamel-topped table.

"All right—now clear out of here," the old man ordered crisply. "Hetty has work to do—and so have the rest of you. Seaman, you come uptsairs and let me dress your shoulder. Roeder," he nodded to a ratty looking thug whose face was badly cut, "you come along, too; you need a patching—though I ought to let you bleed to death. Your damned fool driving is responsible for all this.

"The rest of you," he nodded to the others, who had all the earmarks of city gangsters even though some of them wore grey uniforms and others rough, country clothing, "get out and find those runaways. The girl can't have gotten very

far, even if this detective has found her and is helping her.

"That was a rare piece of brainwork on your part, Seaman—bringing a detective up here!" he turned his wrath on the wounded gangster. "Luckily he will have no chance of getting out of the valley—but I want him brought in here without delay."

WITH that he herded them out through the door ahead of him, and old Hetty was alone with the corpse. Kenneth watched as she stripped the dead driver, watched as she took a surgeon's scalpel from the drawer of the serving table and made incisions in the wrists and ankles, the sides and the neck, to draw off the blood into the buckets which she hung from hooks on the table's edge.

Evidently she was an embalmer, he concluded; she was preparing the corpse for burial—but when the flow of blood had nearly ceased she picked up another, larger knife and drove it into the neck just above the collarbone. The knife sank deep, traveled down the torso to the pelvis. With expert fingers she wielded it, opening up the chest and abdomen, sheering through tissue and bones so that she could reach the organs and remove them.

She was performing an autopsy, was disemboweling the corpse. From the torso she turned to the head, cut open the scalp and trephined off the top of the skull, to discard the brains.

Kenneth had watched autopsies before, but this woman showed none of the surgeon's alert interest in her task; her only purpose seemed to be to empty the hollow shell of what had been a man—and her face; that was what startled him and sent a shiver down his spine. Her face had become demoniacal, the face of a depraved murderess instead of a surgeon! Her hands and white-rubber uniform

(Continued on page 103)

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THE SOUL-THIEF

By WAYNE ROBBINS

"I am Wallie Northrup," I whispered through the bars that imprisoned me. But they paid no attention . . . and in helpless horror I saw my wife-to-be slide lovingly into the arms of the inhuman monster who had stolen my soul!

THE WINDOW was small; I hadn't realized until then just how small. I took hold of the bars and stared out into the other half of the room.

"Please," I whispered, "something's gone wrong. You've got to believe me! I—I'm Wallie Northrup. I swear it. . ."

I peered out to study their faces. I wasn't believed.

Doctor Ingham was there, lined, mustached face unmoved. This was an old story to him. He showed a little pity, because he was a gentle man; but it was only the usual pity.

I looked at the other two. The man was medium tall, quite young, and hawk-nosed. People have always told Leroy and me that we were hawk-nosed. The girl's face showed real pity, and a dim horror.

"Wallie," she whispered to the man at her side, "I never can get used to it. Ever since you came he has kept saying these things. Look—his eyes. He really believes it, Wallie!" Yes, I believed it, because it was true! That white-clad man out there should be myself!

His arm tightened about the girl's waist, while her own nurse's costume crackled with the movement. "Don't let it take hold of your imagination, dear," he said. "These people—they are always so sincere about their wild beliefs."

The doctor's "sh-h-h—" told them not to talk this way in front of a patient. The white-clad man's arm worked carelessly up about the girl's waist and brushed momentarily against the swell of her breast.

"Damn you," I said, "I'll kill you. . ." No—that wasn't the right tack; I must reason with them. "Please listen," I started again, trying to sound firm and cool and sane. "I'm Wallie Northrup, and it should be *me* out there. . . " But a wild, desolate sob took over my voice. These things I was saying—I had heard them so many times in the past few days, from almost the instant of my arrival. But before this it hadn't been my voice saying them. An insane man, but not me!

Bare minutes before this I had been standing outside there, with my own arm around the little nurse's waist. I had felt her shudder, and my own distaste had echoed hers. The poor beggar inside the bars was so sincere. . .

"Please let me out," the hawk-nosed man inside had pleaded. "Don't you see it's all wrong? That girl—it should be *my* arm about her. God, I don't understand it; all I know is that *I am Wallie Northrup!*"

The little nurse had lifted my arm away (even as she was doing at this moment with that other) and had whispered: "It disturbs him, throws him into a jealous frenzy. You know . . . all the case. . . ?" Some things, even nurses cannot bring themselves to discuss.

Doctor Ingham had told me the details of the case immediately after my arrival. I had listened—well, not avidly; the man was my own cousin—but at least with burning interest. You may have your degree in psychiatry, but until you come in contact with the ugly realism of tormented minds, you are hopelessly green.

In his will, my uncle had arranged this opportunity for me. Besides offering a chance to break in, it was an easy job at good pay. The small, overworked institution acquired an enlarged staff, at no expense, since my pay came from the estate. Curing Leroy was tacitly understood to be out of the question, but at least someone was to be near to look out for the old man's only son, and see that the estate remained intact until his death. After that, I understood, I was to come into a small portion, while the rest would go to help others like Leroy.

After hearing the sordid account of his adolescent delinquency, his defiance of correction, finally his atrocious attacks on young girls, and the court's subsequent sentence—lightened by his father's influence—I went to see my cousin.

Even though I had been prepared, it was a shock. Our fathers were brothers, and had married sisters, so a certain resemblance was to be expected. I recalled that on one of the last times I saw him when we were about ten, we had dressed in each other's clothes to fool our fathers.

The thin, high-cheeked faces had come from the Delaney side, while the tall backsweep of the forehead and the hawk-nose had come from our fathers.

Leroy wasn't exactly horrible looking behind the bars; I suppose I would have to say that. It was only the shock of looking at myself behind those bars that had got me. And then, there were the eyes. The glint of insanity can hardly be missed. They were great dark mirrors, sad, earnest, pleading. They had a beauty to them, but they were mad.

"SO YOU'RE Wallie," he had greeted, studying me. "I would swear I was seeing myself. Odd, isn't it, our resemblance?"

I had made light of it.

"It's too odd, Wallie," he had continued mournfully. "The fates got things balled up somehow. Here I am, a millionaire—but with bars keeping me in. There you are, penniless, but free—with the same bars keeping you out. It's all wrong."

"That's why I'm here, boy," I had said earnestly. "I've got my degree now, you know. I'm here to get you out." That was a good line, I thought.

But he shook his head. "You know as well as I do that they'll never let me out." For all his madness, Leroy was a cool, logical thinker. "There's only one way for me to get out, and that's to right the wrong that fate has done me. I'd gladly change places with you, penniless though you are. I saw you looking at that nurse just now; you've got everything before you, Wallie, happiness, love. . ."

I managed to get his mind away from that dangerous channel. They said he would get to thinking about such things, and his normal desires would become abnormal demands, and then he would get out of hand.

He went back to his first line. "Look at us, Wallie—we're more than cousins: we've got exactly the same blood in us. We're identical twins, that's what. And somehow fate got us mixed up. They say my soul is a horrid thing, while yours, I suppose, is something lily-white and shining. Well, I know I did bad things, and this time I'll be more careful. When I'm out—"

"Attaboy," I agreed. "I'm glad to hear you cooperating. We'll have you out in no time."

"Oh, I didn't mean that way," he said, with his eyes huge and earnest. "I meant that I'm going to defy fate. I'm going to switch things around. . ." He had looked suddenly crafty, and hushed his words. Only as I left I had heard his whisper carry to me: "It's wrong, terribly wrong. Don't you see that *I am Wallie Northrup?*"

It had grown on him, that fixation. Fixation?—God, no, something far more horrible than that. Because somehow it had actually happened! At first I had been haunted by the horrible compulsion of his eyes, so earnest and pleading. They had seemed to bore into my very brain and implant that sinister message. Always, they drew me, held me fascinated by their depths. . .

And now, it had happened. I groaned, tried once again. My brain was swimming in a red sea. "Please, God, make them believe. Doctor Ingham—Miss Warnock, please—something's wrong. I—I am Wallie Northrup. . ."

It was too much for me, the utter horror of it, the impotent hysteria of my brain. I felt myself reeling drunkenly about the ten-foot, gray-cloth-lined cubicle. I jammed into the walls, butting at them with my head, while the red haze mounted. I stumbled to my knees one last time, and went unconscious.

MY FIRST impression on awakening was pure, unembodied horror. I thought I was still in the cell. But my

eyes opened to look up into Glenda Warnock's face.

"It's all right, Wallie—Doctor Northrup. The experience was too much for you—any one might faint. He was so sincere."

My lungs filled with air for a sudden shout of joy, but I stifled it. "How—how long was I under?"

"Not very long—well, all of five minutes, I suppose." Her eyes studied my face intently. "You'll get used to it. . ." She was the experienced one now, reminding me of my greenness.

I looked around, saw that Doctor Ingham was gone from the room. I lay on my own bed. The provisions my uncle had left directed the institution to give his son the best of everything. His was a large cell, in another wing from the rest of the patients. They had walled across the corridor in front of the cell to give more privacy, and provide sleeping space for an attendant.

"I'm all right now," I said weakly. I stumbled to my feet, with the compelling desire to look into the cell. He was in there, hair stringing before his eyes, denim-clad figure pacing the cubicle. Was it *he,* I wondered, or—myself? God, what a mad thought! I had dreamed it, I told myself. But his great, tragic eyes told me differently. They said it was true.

"Something's wrong," he whispered. "I—I'm Wallie. . ." I could look into the man's very soul at that moment. I could understand the complete, soul-staggering frightfulness of his thoughts. I had just been through it. . .

"Miss—Glenda, come with me. I want to talk with you."

I led her outside. The wings of the buildings enclosed three sides of the lawned square. It was lazily peaceful out there in the late sun. We found a bench.

"Glenda, this may be the wrong moment to talk of it, but I've got to. I can't help feeling that it's now or—never." Her amber-brown eyes looked up at me, then away as she blushed. She knew, of course; I had seen it in her eyes. "What—go on, Doctor."

Quite simply, then, I told her I loved her.

"I know," she whispered. "Why wait to talk about it, when we both realize it?"

I kissed her then; but it wasn't a long one. A cackle of appreciative mirth rollicked down from some barred window above.

"Then listen, darling," I said slowly, "look into my eyes. Study me—I can't tell you why. But I want you to be able to recognize me and the look in my eyes—wherever and whenever you see me."

"Why, I don't understand," she answered, startled. "Wouldn't I be silly to be in love with someone I couldn't recognize?"

"I hope so," I breathed, remembering what had happened. "But keep this in mind: whatever happens, whenever I call—you've got to trust me. Trust me and do as I ask."

She began to say, "Why, that's what love is—" and then she must have read something of my ghastly fears, even though I had scarcely admitted them to myself. *"Wallie!* You're not thinking—Oh, how absurd! You're still thinking about your cousin's delusion. But it has only affected you because he's so sincere."

"Yes," I thought, *"he's so sincere—just as sincere as I was. . ."*

I AWOKE from a namelessly fearful dream. The terror of it sent me staggering from my bunk into the dark. Only a pale wash of light lessened the black. I crashed into a wall, directionless, but it didn't hurt for some reason.

I saw that the light was coming from beyond a little barred window and wondered who had left a light on in Leroy's cell. I went to the window, peered out. Everything was all right. I guessed

There was a sleeping hulk in the cot across the way.

But something was wrong about that light. Then I knew, and screamed.

There never had been any light in Leroy's cell; it was in the partitioned-off corridor outside. It was now as it always had been, a feverish and dim bulb to dispell the lurking gloom. I wasn't looking into the cell; I was looking out!

My screams kept rocketing out into the dark. I paused once and heard from somewhere a faint, jubilant answer, a comradely answer in the words of madness.

The figure across the corridor lurched cursing from the cot. He came pajamaed to the window. How many times in the night I had awakened and done precisely that thing!

"It's all right, Leroy," he said. "Go back to sleep. You've got to sleep, or I'll send for Ingham and his hypo." That was a threat that usually worked on—whatever person it was meant for.

"Oh, God," I moaned. "It's all wrong. I can't stand this hell! Don't you see? I—I'm not Leroy, I'm Wallie. . ." The last words rose in spite of me to a high, tremulous wail.

He began to move away. "I'll have to call Ingham."

"No," I pleaded. "No—I'll calm down." This was the only thing to do. A hypo would shove me off the dark ledge of consciousness, and I had to keep my mind working. Somehow, I had to think.

The man who should have been myself moved back under the bulb, and I could see his face. I studied the face objectively, as though it weren't really mine. With overhead light throwing deep shadows into the eye-sockets, with the beaked nose prominently highlighted, it wasn't too pleasant. Feverish glints flickered within those black cavaties. Triumphant, mocking; he was laughing at my torture.

"You devil," I said tautly, "you've done it. You said you would. But how? How?"

"What are you talking about, Leroy?" His eyes were pools of evil laughter.

"Don't call me Leroy! You know what I mean. You've stolen. . ."

"Oh? Still on that, huh? Well, it won't wash. Why don't you use some sense? If you only try to *act* normal, why maybe I could get you out someday." Those hellish eyes.

Muttering, he turned back toward the cot. I took a turn around the cell, trying to calm myself. I heard the door into the hall open and close. I gave it no thought until I heard a low, husky voice in indistinct words. The voice sounded familiar and I went to the window to see.

It was a girl with a lush head of glinting red hair. She was a dark shadow posed against the closed door. But I could make out the provocative upturning of her crimson lips, the upthrust of youth-

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Cops and columnists labelled me "murder-maniac"; my best pal invited me to be the corpse at a wake —if three guys named Moe didn't get me first. And my only ally was that punch-drunk stumblebum, Sailor Duffy! . . . A murder classic you can't afford to miss!

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ful breasts beneath some gossamer wrap.

I had seen her around; more than that, in fact. One of the nurses, she had seemed overly friendly with me ever since my arrival; had told me by the too-nearness of her body sometimes, and the careless tossing of her maddeningly proportioned curves, that here was a creature afire with promise.

Late at night this way, she should be away over in the other wing, with the other nurses. My heart set up a sudden hammering when I realized that her coming to my room tonight was unmistakable in meaning. But then my heart almost stopped altogether, and my throat went dry with pity, realizing what she had got into. For she had come, not to glean love, but—madness.

Leroy was up, moving deliberately, like some languid animal sensing prey.

"Hello, my dear. What brings you here? Come on in—" Her low laugh echoed through the room.

"You're the cool one, though, aren't you? As if I weren't risking expulsion coming here." Her lips twisted thoughtfully, while her eyes lifted in angelic innocence. "You've got a patient, Doctor. The truth is—I've had such a beastly pain . . . right over my heart." Her little hand plucked meaningly at the lacy collar of her night wrap. So that was her line to entice a cool doctor.

Leroy—I have to call him that—smiled benignly at her. With a travesty of medical unconcern he reached for the front of her gown. Couldn't she see that devilish glint in his eyes? Didn't she have any idea that hell itself was opening its grisly jaws?

She had sunk down onto the cot, with him beside her. The sudden catch of his breath was audible even to me as his hands touched the fabric of her wrap. The girl's only reaction was an echo of a sigh.

Now, I thought, *comes madness.*

But the door opened again. "I wanted to tell you. . ." It was Glenda Warnock. She stood paralyzed against the door, taking in every detail of the scene she had stumbled onto.

She was very calm. Not horrified, particularly, nor even sickened, but only shocked into icy realization. "I'm—glad," she said slowly, "that I saw this. Sorry to have intruded. . ."

LEROY was up at once, acting flustered, ashamed. "No, darling! You don't understand. I—she came. . ." He was acting my part for me with hellish mastery.

"Please don't insult my intelligence by excuses, Doctor Northrup. I'm not a child. But I hardly thought you could do such a thing so soon after your candied words to me."

My girl, my own beloved girl, and I was losing her. My own voice intruded: "Glenda, please listen. He isn't Wallie; I am! I wouldn't have done such a—"

Her ears, I knew, didn't even pick up my words. Just a madman, his vile emotions aroused by this sordid scene. But Leroy swung snarlingly toward the barred window. "You shut up, Leroy. I've had enough of you. If it hadn't been for your wild claims I wouldn't have been so unstrung as to do such a thing!"

His eyes were narrowed into slits of grim amusement. He didn't care.

"Of course I shan't expect you to speak with me again. . ." and Glenda was gone. As the door slid shut Leroy answered her with a low laugh and returned to the side of the redhead, who had remained throughout all this poised and unconcerned.

"Well!" she laughed. "There was one mad girl! Did I break something up?"

"Forget it," he answered. "Why should I care when—" His own actions finished the sentence for him. Then, the poor little devil, she made a sensuous, intentional

movement toward him. And Leroy went mad. . .

"Oh, the poor little devil," I kept thinking.

He was clever, though. He kept one hand cupped over her mouth all the while the other did those frightful things to her, until it was all but over and she was unconscious.

Only the gurgle of her abortive screams seeped out into the gloom of the place. Once in a while a screamed curse from myself joined in. .

Her eyes were bulging from that suffocating hand. Her poor body threshed violently, but it was no use. I became too sick to watch any more. All I could think of was that my body—my *real* body—was being made to do those damnable things to that poor little devil, who at the most had bargained only to cater to the normal demands of her little, animal body.

I couldn't look. I slipped onto my knees below the window, grateful that a powerful sleeping tablet I had taken seemed at last to be offering me delayed forgetfulness. I hoped my mind would black-out quickly. . . . I heard a door open, I remember, and a gasp, and then—

I was waking up, with the odd feeling that I hadn't really slept at all. But my body was flexing, yawning, like some jungle thing wakening from a kill and glut.

"Wake up, man, for God's sake—" I opened my eyes and saw that it was Doctor Ingham's little mustached face peering at me. He was shaking me, his lips writhing in horror.

I looked then at the thing occupying the other half of the cot. I stared at the blood on me, all over my hands. The girl moaned from her world of agony.

"I didn't do it," I said.

"What? You try to claim . . .? God, man, you're stark mad—madder than any of the patients!"

I couldn't think. All I could do was stare at the girl's torn body and repeat that I didn't do it. "It was Leroy," I said desperately. "He—he took over my body . . ."

Ingham swore. "Can't you think of something better than that? You went berserk that's what. Maybe there's madness through all your family."

"No, I saw it. It was Leroy . . ."

"If you keep that up we'll have to lock you up!"

I peered up at him uncertainly. "You mean to say you're not going to? You're not going to call the police?"

"Police?" His inflection said that this was the worst thing yet. "And have it known that the staff at Midvale Hospital is wilder than the patients? Heavens, no! It would ruin us. Here, help me—"

Together we got her out to his car, whisked her away to a private hospital he thought would be discreet. "At least I'm going to leave," I muttered. "To hell with the job—I'm getting out of here."

"Oh, no you're not," he said savagely. "You think I'll let a madman loose on the world? My job's curing them. Work for years for a good reputation, and then—see here: you're staying so I can watch you, or else I *will* call the police. Do you hear?"

"But the girl," I asked, "poor little devil, what about her? I haven't got any money."

"None at all?"

"No; only Leroy's fortune."

"You can't dip into that for private use, or you will be in the pen. At that, though," and he shook his head doubtfully, "I guess it's the only way to silence her. Hospital bills and five-thousand . . ."

GLENDA, naturally, didn't know what had happened last night. No one did, except the doctor and me and Leroy. He,

But Glenda, when I finally caught up with her, didn't know how it had ended, of course, was gleefully silent about it.

so at least allowed me to talk with her, but it did no good. I begged, argued, reasoned, but it was useless. I found myself finally dully studying her, her soft curves. The redhead had been beautiful, but I would never, never have traded *this* for her . . .

"Please don't stare at me," she reminded coolly.

"Sorry," I said, and then I asked her to leave forever. "You wouldn't believe me if I tried to explain. But I'm terribly afraid for you—it's something hellish."

"Well, as for leaving," she said, "why I am. I'm taking the train late tomorrow night. A job in my old home town, and I hope you don't think you're important enough to have caused it. You and your petty affairs . . ."

She tossed the mass of her gorgeous unruly hair and left me to stare after her, thinking of the dream of dreams now as remote as shimmering suns.

I went to Leroy's cell and pleaded with him. For awhile he only shook his head and grinned. But finally, after a furtive look around, he said: "All right, then; I admit it, so what? I said it was wrong, and that I would right it by exchanging souls with you. And I'm doing it! All these first times have been only preliminary experiments—it's really quite hard to do, and I have to gain strength for the time when I make it permanent."

"You devil," I whispered, "you fiend from hell. It isn't possible, and yet . . ."

"Not possible, eh? You have never been mad, Wallie, so you haven't wandered in the black regions that I have seen. It's awful, Wallie; but you learn things. It's so black sometimes, and painful—agony just as awful as from a cut or burn—and there are foul winds sighing, telling you things. You learn things."

"Damn you," I said. "You must have sold your soul to do it. Look, Leroy, if I used all my influence to get you out—" I clutched at the bars until my knuckles went white.

"I've told you it's not possible. What I did—they'll never let me out. So someone has to stay in my place. It's really so easy; fate got things mixed up, wrong person in the wrong body . . ."

He did a vicious little dance, whinnying jubilantly. "Why should you care? You'll be a millionaire, won't you? My fortune—and after awhile you can prove you're sane."

"I won't be sane, damn you. I'll be stark, raving mad. I'll be as mad as you are." He bellowed mirth, and I reeled through the door, down the corridor and sought out Ingham's office on the lower floor.

"I'm leaving," I told Ingham. "I can't stand it. Leroy's taking over my body . . ."

His little mustache bristled belligerently, and I remember he was saying: "The hell you are . . ." when everything seemed to fade, to flicker out.

I DIDN'T know, of course, that I was out. Perhaps, I thought, I wasn't. Wouldn't the transition take place instantaneously? Anyway, here I was, with faculties returning to awareness, and I was retching horribly. The little barred window was a row of giant teeth, grinning.

I heard voices coming muffled through the door from the corridor beyond. Then the door opened, and they had come in. "No," Doctor Ingham was saying, "you're sick, boy. Your mind has become contaminated by all this madness—and I insist that you're not going!"

The white-clad male nurse—Leroy, Wallie, it was all the same—begged, whispered that something awful was happening . . .

It was too much for my mind to bear, to have them come in that way, finishing

the conversation I myself had started. I began ranging the cell on lurching drunken feet, while my voice took up a keening of madness and mortal fear.

I was seeing, as time slipped by, into those fearful regions of which Leroy had spoken. Afternoon passed, while the sickness of my mind continually mounted. The hospital went on with its dreary round of duties, working, talking, someone humming tunelessly somewhere . . .

Food was served me by the man who had stolen my life. The food was bitter with dope. My—the body I was tenanting, the one with the ragged denim uniform—it was so tired from my frenzy that it fell exhausted, finally. But when I awakened I was still in the cell.

So, I thought, this was the final time of which Leroy spoke. He had completed his experiments, and now it was to be a permanent trade. I lay thinking for a while of Glenda, and I moaned with fear for her. If only she would leave tonight instead of tomorrow night. . . . Without her knowing what was taking place, something frightful might happen to her if for a moment she relented in her attitude toward me. I knew I had made a terrible mistake, done her a ghastly wrong in trying to convince her I was blameless. If for a moment she wavered, if she should come to believe me, what a hideous fate lay in store. . . .

SOMETIME or other I remember awakening to the sound of voices. There was a new, blustering one, that said, "Evil looking cuss, isn't he?" I swore at him in a long, steady rhythm until I felt the sting of hypo.

I had heard the mention of fingerprints. ". . . we knew he was still locked up all okey, but the chief got this screwy idea. This crime is so much like the ones this guy here used to do, see? Hell of a thing, a girl attacked in the park, all torn to pieces, just about. Dead, of course."

"So what did you want?" Ingham's cool voice asked.

"Prints—oh, I know, I know. It's ridiculous, with him in here all the time. But you know, the chief. . . ."

I didn't bother to resist. I knew that the prints they had found on the murdered girl wouldn't be mine—not my present ones. But I also knew with a horrible certainty where the ownership did lie.

Merciful heaven, the unendurable agony of such knowledge, to know that another is using your body, subjecting it to carnality and abomination, leading it within the shadow of the electric chair. . . .

The next day teetered by, and all the while I lay locked within the lusting arms of ultimate madness; there's nothing else to call it.

Dark finally came, and the hospital became enshrouded in sticky silence, except for here and there the wailing voice of some sleepless sufferer like myself. I listened as night wore on for the sound of a departing car, praying it would be one taking Glenda forever away from this scene of suffocating menace. *Please,* I was thinking, *please keep her away from this wing. Keep her away from me forever. . . .*

And it was just then that the door in the corridor opened, and I knew with sick horror that it was she. I crept to the window, while the blood seeped from my heart.

There she stood, just inside the door. Her face was pale until she caught sight of the man rising to his elbow on the cot; then she flushed.

"I—I shouldn't have come here. I'm not that kind. Only, I had to see you once more, At least, I had to say goodbye to all our dreams . . ."

"Come in and let's talk," Leroy asked softly.

There was a ladderback chair in the room and she occupied it uncertainly.

"I was just going to call a taxi—" She didn't continue. She seemed to be looking into some great distance as she sat. I knew that she was thinking about us together out there on the lawn. She began sobbing low in her throat.

"You're not going after all, are you?" He reached out to touch her knee.

"No. . . . I guess not," she said, and my world suddenly stopped. Now, I knew, horror would come upon her.

IT CAME slowly; whatever he was, he was an artist at cunning and deception. He had her in his arms, pretending to comfort her sobs. She didn't realize that he was sinking with her onto the cot. . . .

Then his hands got out of control, and began lingering over her. He began kissing her throat, and it was hell. He forced her back, began working at the collar of her dress. Her eyes had opened wide and she began arching away from him. "Oh, no," she whispered.

His hands had caught up the fabric of her dress, began ripping it away in a slow, deliberate movement. "Oh, no," she said again. "I thought that—Oh, God, all life will be unclean after this . . ." She tried to get away.

His madness was inarticulate. Only occasional feral grunts punctuated his abandoned actions.

"Damn you," I screamed, "somehow I'll kill you."

I saw then that she had fainted, and I was glad. His great mad eyes lingered on her virginal beauty with fearful intentions. I moaned aloud a plea to him to kill her outright, but he sent a shocked look in my direction and clutched her to him like something infinitely precious.

I fought the bars until my hands dripped blood. The door, I knew, offered no hope of escape. It was flush with the wall, without knob or hand-hold of any kind. At last I crept into a far corner of the cell and hid my head to blot out the ghastly sounds.

Then I heard voices and tensed, listening. Doctor Ingham had come in. Thank heaven. . . .

I heard him say: "What! Another one? You insane devil—"

Leroy's answer was lost to me. In a complaining voice, the doctor said: "I'll be lucky if I get out of this without my neck being stretched. Should have known better than to tie myself up with a crazy fool."

"Don't you see," Leroy answered, "that the guy is in love with this girl? Well, it is just *the* thing to do—you should have heard him. I guess he's unconscious now. It took the last bit of his mind, and now we're safe . . ."

"They'll hang us both," the doctor moaned. "You fool, at least you didn't have to kill that girl in the park—the one the cops found. It was just luck we had *him* inside there, so the prints were different."

"You won't feel so bad, though," the other voice answered, "when you get your hundred thousand, eh?"

My mind wouldn't seem to function. I shoved silently to the window again, and looked out. I saw that in spite of the intrusion the madman was still poised above his gruesome work.

Why didn't the doctor do something?

I went back to my corner, desperately trying to think. I knew that somehow the doctor wasn't acting right; he should stop this atrocity.

"Lucky thing," he had said, "lucky thing he was inside there . . ."

". . . . it took the last bit of his mind, and now we're safe . . ."

It occurred to me suddenly that one fact was clear: they wanted me to go insane, but yet they wanted to keep me alive. That was enough to work on, and what I tried to do—perhaps it shows how nearly they had succeeded.

LEROY had never been particularly violent, nor suicidal. His bunk was a quite ordinary one, though fastened to the wall. Silently as possible I rolled back the mattress. But I had to work fast, because any minute the doctor would be leaving, it seemed, and then Leroy would bring to conclusion his frightful task.

The metal spring-frame came off the bunk. With infinite care against any warning creak, I lifted it and leaned it against the back wall, beneath a tiny grilled air vent. Then I lay down on a sheet and muffled the sound with my body as I tore from it a long strip. I made a rope and knotted it about my neck.

I set my toes between the springs and began climbing, ignoring noise now. I tied the end of the rope to the grilled vent-hole, and shouted!

"Leroy—Ingham, I'm going to kill myself . . ."

There was a pause before Ingham yelled: "Shut up! There's nothing in there to do it with."

"I'm going to hang myself. If you don't believe it, listen to this—"

I heard Ingham say to Leroy, "He can't do it," then, holding onto the rope I kicked the springs from beneath my feet and let loose of the rope. I tried to be careful, because I didn't want to die; at least not until I knew for sure that I had failed to save Glenda.

I had counted on my gurgles to warn them I was really doing it, but God!—I hadn't known the pain would be like this! In spite of me, my hands tried to raise me, to ward off strangling doom. The black turned to blinding, rocketing brilliance, and my breath choked off and my eyes bulged out. Finally even the pain choked off, and I seemed regarding the world and my own threshing limbs with a weary indifference. Even this ended, and I was blind and deaf, and my last thought was that they weren't coming in; I had failed. . . .

I awakened on the floor. I was retching and my hands were tearing at my constricted throat. There was someone cursing.

"Did you save him? I can't let loose of this damned girl—she's waking up. I'll kill her now . . ."

That oriented me. I remembered it all now—and it had worked! The doctor was inside the cell. The door must be open!

I came up fighting even before my eyes opened. Ingham was off guard. I made intentionally a great deal of noise, screaming and bouncing Ingham's head against the wall, in order to delay Leroy.

I threw the unconscious man against the wall and barged through the door. Leroy's hands were tight about Glenda's throat, and her face was suffusing with the darkness of near death.

He had to let loose to meet my hurtling attack, but I was no equal for his maniacal desperation. I'm not much of a fighter. He caught me in a bear-hug that crushed ribs like kindlings. A blow crunched into my mouth and brought the hot taste of blood; another sent me crashing over backwards. My head struck the corner of the ladder-back chair, and I thought I was knocked out.

While I sprawled shaking my head to clear it, Death was bearing down on me. I reached my hands over my shoulders and got the legs of the chair and brought it weakly over my head. He tangled with it; I wrenched it free again, got a better hold on the back, and crashed it crunchingly down on his head and shoulders. The sound was nauseating.

I'll never forget his broken head. . . .

I SLAMMED the door to the cell and trapped Doctor Ingham inside.

Glenda had revived and was looking at me with a great fear. "Who—who are you?" Her eyes were on my denim uniform.

"Glenda," I snapped. "Now, by heaven,

you've got to listen to me. I told you something hellish was going on. They've been putting me into Leroy's cell, convincing me things were so that weren't—driving me mad." I could see that she still doubted.

"Don't you see? Leroy had a fortune, but he was powerless to use it. It was I who had real control of it. So, if he could exchange places with me he would have his own fortune, while I would be left behind the bars as the maniac. They had to keep me alive, because the minute Leroy died, according to the will, the whole thing, almost, would go to charity. The only person in the world who could possibly have known me well enough to see the difference was you, and you would have been dead."

"I'll never know for certain," she whispered, "whether you're telling the truth or not. Are you Wallie?—or a madman?"

I reached outside the door to the wall switches and turned on every light in the place. "Now look," I commanded. "Can't you see the difference in our faces? It's there, but it wasn't noticeable under dim lights. Then look at this—" I rolled up the dead man's sleeve. "His arm is covered with hypo scars. Look at mine; it's only got a few, the ones they gave me when they wanted to get me back out of the cell."

"Then—I've been wrong," Glenda said, and her lashes glossed with tears. "I could have stopped it all . . ."

I took her in my arms, then, clothes or no clothes, and it was a moment before I realized another voice was speaking.

"He's right, my girl," the voice from behind the bars said. "It was Leroy's idea. And I wanted the money he had offered for my help. We had to be sure Wallie was completely insane before we could feel safe, because a rational mind might eventually have beaten us, even though the authorities never would have listened to him. Leroy had built the thing up so cleverly by his own pretense of thinking he was really Wallie, that it looked easy.

"There were lots of opportunities to drug you, Wallie; water, sleeping-tablets, and the like. We would just be ready when the drug took effect, then switch clothes and make the change. You thought, of course, that the change took place instantaneously, because we made it seem that way. When you awoke in Glenda's arms that first day, you didn't know we had sent her out of the room for ammonia . . ."

We were hardly listening, because Glenda was still in my arms.

"You—you're my Wallie," she said huskily.

"Yes, I'm Wallie," I answered. wondering if forever after when I uttered those words they wouldn't contain for me the fearful echo of a maniac, screaming from his cell.

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WHEN THE WEREWOLF HOWLS

By
EMERSON
GRAVES

Irma Low had never liked Lester Sands . . . but it was not until she lay helpless on the floor of that dank cavern, that she knew the monstrous secret which set him apart from other men. . . .

IRMA LOW had never liked Lester Sands, the young man who occupied one of the small cottages adjoining the Inn which she and her spry but blind grandfather ran during the summer months. He was tall and rangy, and walked in a shambling kind of way, hanging his head with its mass of ill-kempt hair, slightly forward, his long arms dangling at his sides. His eyes were a strange golden brown, unusually large and bright.

Now as he faced Irma in the low ceilinged, old-fashioned kitchen of the Inn, she felt herself inwardly cringe and wish he would go away.

"You will walk with me tonight," he was saying. "It is so beautiful out there among the crags. I must teach you to love the woods and the mountains as I do—

you don't realize the things you are missing."

She took the plate of small uncooked steaks from the ice box and placed them on the table near the stove. Her usually smiling face was a blank now, except for the troubled furrow between her brows. Her rounded body looked almost doll-like, as she deftly peeled the potatoes and made them ready for frying. Her heart was pounding strangely, as Lester spoke; pounding not with excitement, but a vague indefinable fear.

"You'll come," he persisted. "Just once: I shan't ask you again, if you tell me you did not like it."

She faced him impatiently. "No, Lester. I've told you no, a hundred times." Her eyes were snapping, and in her annoyance they seemed more blue than usual. Her wavy black hair was tumbled about her hot face. Her scarlet lips, so perfect they could have been etched by an artist, were trembling. She tried to steady them.

His dangling hands came up and held her for an instant. He gripped her shoulders and swung her to face him. Twilight was creeping in the window. Strange shadows, strange sounds of the approaching night, seemed suddenly to be upon them. Irma shuddered and drew away.

The kitchen was a room about ten feet wide and twenty feet long. In it there was a table, made of plain wood, several chairs, the stove and ice box. The floor was a crude unfinished wood. There were two windows on each side of the room, and the electric light hung overhead. The switch to the light was over near the door which led into the dining-room.

Irma started for it now. But again Lester Sands caught at her.

"Irma," he said, his voice low and menacing, "you can't treat me this way any longer. You know that I love you—"

"Stop—let go of me! You're hurting me, Lester—"

"Hurting you?" His hot breath was close to her cheek.

SUDDENLY she was free. Her anger flared. "You get out of this kitchen, Lester Sands, and don't ever speak to me again!" Why did the man revolt her so horribly? And why, behind it all, did she fear him?

He was unattractive, to be sure. But he was a mid-European who had been through hard days, she understood, and certainly as he stood there now, furtively watching her, he looked more like a chastened animal, than something to be feared.

But, as she crossed the room and switched on the light, the revulsion and terror persisted.

"Go on out, Lester," she repeated. "You had no right to touch me—"

"Why not? You let George Harvey touch you. I saw him last night, here in the kitchen. He put his hands on your shoulders—"

The door from outdoors swung open. "So what?" the newcomer said. It was young George Harvey, who had charge of the boats on the lake connected with the Inn. "Hello, Irma. What's all this I heard through the window just now?" He eyed Sands coldly.

"Oh, nothing," Irma said lamely. She opened the top of the stove. The coals were perfect for broiling the steaks. "Lester, and you too, George—please let me get dinner now—"

George paused an instant. Irma's eyes followed him as he turned to the bucket and got himself a cold glass of water. For the instant, her whole thought was upon George: his fine strong body and clear eyes. Even his glance seemed to thrill and steady her.

George started for the dining room door, grinning back at her. "I'll see you later," he said.

She could hear Lester Sands padding,

in his sneakers, toward the back door, which was not more than fifty feet from his cottage. She swung about, realizing she must hurry with the dinner or it would be late. There were more than a dozen guests in the Inn and they must be fed.

As she turned, she saw Lester hurrying toward the door. Her attention was caught by the drip of blood on the table and onto the floor, as he moved forward. She gasped, but swiftly averted her eyes, lest he should see that she had caught him at so strange a theft. For in his hand, held slightly in front of him, was one of the uncooked steaks which they were to have for dinner!

What did he want with that raw meat?

She turned back to the stove. He opened the back door and mumbling a goodby, left her.

But her curiosity was too much for her. Lester was coming there for dinner. He had no way of cooking in his particular cottage. She gave him time to get home. And then, surreptitiously, she crept from the kitchen and along the narrow path to his cottage. She could see he had reached it, by the dim light showing through the curtains.

She got to the cottage, and cautiously crept up to the window.

Lester was there. He was sprawled on a leather couch, and in his hands and drooling from his mouth, was the remnant of the raw steak.

Irma felt nauseated at the sight, but she stood there, hypnotized. He was licking the raw blood from his fingers now and his tongue came out and cleaned it from his chin. . . .

Irma fled back through the black night, to the kitchen of the Inn, and she was trembling from head to foot.

Somehow the dinner was ready at last. Annie, the young girl who set the table and assisted Irma, went to announce it. "I'll tell grandpa," Irma added.

SHE hurried up the small flight of stairs, prepared to tell him the horrible, strange sight she had seen in Lester's cabin. But when she reached his room, and saw the plucky old man, so brave in spite of his blindness and the loss of his son, Irma's father, both in the past five years, she felt a pity come upon her and decided she would not fret him with her own worries. But she did say:

"Grandpa, you know I don't like that Lester Sands. What do you think about him?" She helped him from his chair and placed his hand affectionately on her arm as they started toward the stairs.

"Don't like him," the old man said briskly. "Wish I could get a look at him. There's something familiar about his voice. I'd be just as pleased if you didn't have anything to do with him, Irma. I don't trust him."

They were at the foot of the steps now, and young George Harvey joined them. "Don't trust me, Grandpa?" he said laughingly. All the young people here called the old genleman "grandpa." "How come?"

"I wasn't speaking of you. It was that Sands fellow. I don't like him hanging around Irma. There's something queer about him. How do you feel George?"

Young Harvey twinkled. "Me? Why I'd just like to punch him in the nose. He gives me the creeps, the way he pads around in those damn sneakers."

Irma took her place at the long narrow table. Lester Sands was there, facing her. She could not meet his gaze and he stared brazenly and steadily at her. She tried to eat, but the food choked in her throat. She felt hot, hysterical tears trying to rise to her eyes. Her hands were trembling and her heart pounded with a nameless fear. She could not look at the cooked steak; she saw only the drooling blood on the chin of Lester Sands and his greedy pawing hands, tearing at shredded raw meat, and his teeth sinking greedily into

it, as she had seen it in his cottage where he lay sprawled upon the leather divan.

"You're not eating," Lester said, leaning across the table to her. "Is the steak too well done?"

She quivered inwardly. "I have a headache," she lied.

When the dinner was over at last, she realized she must confide in someone. Why not George? He was sensible and strong, and could advise her.

They went to a small cliff-like rock by the side of the Inn. The stars were not out, nor the moon. It was a sullen night, with fitful gusts of wind and low-hung moody clouds.

Briefly she told him what she had seen. She felt him stiffen. At first he did not make any comment. Then he said slowly:

"I'll have to get permission from your grandfather to throw him off the place—"

Irma said, "But why would he do such a thing? It was so disgusting."

He suddenly was gentle. He put his arm around her and drew her closer to him. She felt the strong protection of his young body, and it seemed a barrier for her from this outside menace, whatever it might be.

"You'll have to trust me, sweetheart," he said softly. "Because I love you and some day I hope you'll be my wife—" There was a hushed expectancy in his voice. He waited for her answer. And all the night sounds seemed suddenly to have stopped. All that Irma could hear was the tumultuous beating of her heart, pressed so close to his.

"Your wife," she murmured finally. "I so much want to be your wife, George."

He took her hungrily into his arms and showered her soft hair with kisses.

Irma was lost in her new joy, when she heard a twig crack in the underbrush nearby. A cold fear crept down her spine. Who was there? Was it Lester? And if it were, what could he do to harm this love which George was offering!

"George," she murmured into his shoulder, "did you hear something?"

"Probably a rabbit—"

IRMA got shakingly to her feet. She was used to the darkness. She peered toward the underbrush, from which the sound had come.

"George," she cried suddenly, "look—his eyes! I'm sure they're Lester's eyes—"

George was beside her instantly, gripping her trembling hands and steadying her. "Where, dear? I'll fix him tomorrow, the impudent cur—"

Irma's blood was cold in her veins. There was nothing there now. But she had seemed to see something on all fours, padding toward them furtively, with head hung forward. Then those unforgettable eyes of Lester's met her, challenging her. They were his eyes!

"George, did you see him? Or have I gone mad—"

George tried to soothe her. "You're all upset over what you saw before dinner," he murmured.

He led her gently back to the Inn. Two or three times he glanced back, but no one was following them.

Alone in her bedroom on the first floor, with trees crowding her window, Irma sank to her bed sobbing. If only she had a mother or father. She didn't want to be alone tonight. To undress, and lie down in bed, and have the nightmare of today's events parade before her, would be too ghastly an episode.

But finally she got a grip on herself. She did not light a light. She took off her dress and dropped it carelessly to a chair. Then her shoes and stockings, exposing her dainty, rounded white legs. But with her, there in the room, she felt eyes upon her, peering, prying. And Lester's revolting kisses in the kitchen, cloying bestial kisses, seemed clinging to her now.

But it was dark in the room. No one could see her. She stripped off the remainder of her clothes. Her fevered body welcomed the release. She felt the soft puffs of wind creep through the tree-sheltered window, and caress her body as she stood straight before it. She held her arms behind her waist, breathing in the night air to steady herself.

She went closer to the window. Then she recoiled. Someone had crept away at her approach, and she saw the skulking figure as it rounded the Inn and disappeared into the night.

Who could have been watching her in the darkness of her room from that distance? It was impossible for anyone to have been able to see her in the darkness. Or were those weird, uncanny eyes of Lester's capable of doing strange things? . . .

She bolted her window, in spite of the heat. And her sleep, though slow in coming, held her the night through.

Before she was up next day, George had received orders from her grandfather to get Sands off the property. When she went onto the terrace, she saw the taxi arriving to take him away. . . .

George was at her side. "That's the end of him," he said. "He'll never bother you again."

But Irma was staring into Lester Sands' strange eyes, as he came riding slowly past. And in his evil gaze, there seemed a promise that he would be back!

TWO weeks went by. And during those two weeks, particularly at night, Irma felt the haunting, vague sense of being watched. Her imagination was running high. Often she would think she saw those weird eyes of Lester's, peering at her from the outside darkness, glinting strangely, seeming to see where no human eyes could see. She would awaken at night, thinking they were upon her, gazing upon her flimsily clad body from the window, roving her, seeing her white flesh as she lay on her bed.

Then, one afternoon, a messenger came to the Inn. He had with him, a "seeing-eye" dog, one of those valuable, amazingly intelligent animals, bred and carefully trained to lead its blind master. The card told that it was a gift from a friend of her grandfather's—a man from whom he had not heard for years. The friend was in Latvia now. And this hound had been sent to this country after Saul Hotchkiss, the friend, heard of old man Low's blindness.

All that afternoon, the old man experimented with the dog. "Why, Irma," he exclaimed. "It's wonderful. See how the brute stops at the steps—"

It was a huge, powerful animal, with tawny-gold hair and a slinking, shambling gait. A breed of German shepherd. Irma joined in her grandfather's enthusiasm and that night she went to bed with a sense of relief: no one would dare prowl these grounds with a dog like that to defend them!

Irma's room was at the end of the hall, and then left. There was no other room or door facing her, so she felt safe in leaving her door ajar as no guest had reason to come down the hall this far.

As usual, tonight, she did not light her light, but started to undress in the dark.

She went to the window, let the soft, caressing breezes sweep her nude body and cool her warm face, with the feeling that tonight she need have no fear that an intruder stood out there, peering at her.

Several moments went by, and the breeze seemed to stiffen suddenly. Her hair swept back from her face. What had caused the sudden change in the wind?

Then she heard a soft scraping, as though her door was being drawn further open!

She swung about. Could one of the lodger's have dared intrude!

For a moment she saw nothing. Then, at the base of the door, she saw two eyes roving her—Lester's eyes!

She screamed. Cold chills went down her spine. She stood staring, as slowly the eyes receded. She could see nothing but them in the darkness. Their glint made their own light.

Her grandfather and one of the guests came running. Lights went on.

"Irma—what is it? Are you hurt?" the old man demanded.

"Lester," she gasped, "was at my door. I saw him—"

"Lester Sands—at your door here in the Inn?" her grandfather echoed. "Why, that's impossible. The dog is here at the foot of the stairs. No one could pass him—"

But the old man with several of the guests proceeded to scour the Inn, with Irma, draped now in a white dressing gown, following them.

"You must have been wrong," her grandfather said finally. "The man upset you when he was here. You've been inclined to be hysterical ever since, Irma. Now go to bed."

She kissed him goodnight and promised she would. Suddenly she was afraid of herself. Was it possible that this was all a figment of her imagination? Evidently she was alone on this floor, carefully guarded by a large, perfectly trained dog. She saw the brute now, lying once more at the foot of the stairs facing the front door. She remembered the card had said the dog's name was *Hundus*. She approached him now, circling in front of him.

The others had gone to bed. She knelt down, deciding to make friends with the brute, get his confidence and have him learn to know her.

SHE dropped down beside the dog, smoothing behind its ears, gently stroking its eyes, as they closed to her touch. One paw came up and she shook it.

Then her blood froze in her veins. The dog looked at her. Its eyes were golden-brown, glinting—

She rushed to her room and was about to shove her door shut, when she saw that the brute had followed and was standing between her and the closing door. Standing there, watching her.

"Hundus!" she gasped. "Go lie down!" She was trembling and her throat felt dry.

The dog stared at her for another brief instant. Then it turned obediently and shambled back to its place at the foot of the stairs.

Three days later, the guests planned a boat trip on the lake to the further shore, where they would have a picnic supper. George would take them, and he urged Irma to come too.

"I can't, George," she said wistfully. "Poor old grandpa—he hates picnics, and I couldn't leave him alone."

"Well, next week, you and I'll have one alone. Will you promise?"

She answered his kiss, and his strong body held her close an instant. Then the party, laughing and singing gaily as they wound their way down the trail to the lake, was on its way.

The day passed slowly. Irma kept running to her grandfather to make sure he was all right, as he sat on the terrace smoking his pipe, or resting on his bed, or watering his favorite flowers at the side of the Inn. Quite obviously, her attentions began to make him fidgety. She could see it in his brisk question that last time she came to his room. He had been asleep and her arrival awakened him.

"Think Hundus and I'll take a brief ramble," he said. They had been out several times for walks and always the old man came back thrilled with the experience and enthusiastic over the sagacity of this "seeing-eye" dog.

"Isn't it a little late, grandpa?" she asked. "It's past six, you know."

"It will be light for a couple of hours," he said. "Then I'll enjoy our little supper together. Shall we have it on the terrace?"

Irma watched him walking proudly over the sloping ground, holding to the stiff leather strap which was Hundus' leash. She wanted to call to him, and ask him not to go. Terror, unreasonable but persistent, was upon her. Was she afraid for her grandfather, or afraid of being left here alone? She had told Annie she would not need her today.

She was sewing on a soft undergarment, when she saw the lad coming up the driveway. As he got closer, she realized it was a telegraph boy. Vaguely she wondered if it were for one of the guests. She and her grandfather never got wires.

"Miss Irma Low?" the boy asked as he approached her. "Sign here, please."

She waited until the boy started away. Then she tore open the telegram. It read:

"Puzzled by your letter of thanks. Did not send dog. Saul Hotchkiss."

Then she saw that it was a cablegram from Latvia. At first the full import of what she read, did not reach her. Then gradually, she realized some kind of trick must have been played on her and her grandfather regarding the dog. Who would have played a practical joke? Not George. He said openly he didn't like the hound—it had a shifty eye. He was laughing, it was true. But Irma knew he meant it. Then who would have sent an expensive dog like Hundus, and sign the name of an old friend of the family?

The thing pounded at her. Who was this dog? How had she dared trust her grandfather with him! And the dog's eyes—

COULD Lester have sent him? He was the only one who would not sign his own name. At the memory of Lester, again the drooling blood of raw meat on his hands and chin, came to make her shudder.

Time was passing swiftly. The first dimming shadows of twilight had crept about the Inn. It was dropping into a shrouded shadow, with stalking trees blurring in the distance and the first of the nightsounds creeping about her. An owl hooted, its eerie wail like a signal from the forest—a signal of distress and despair.

Irma glanced swiftly about. Surely her grandfather should be coming soon. She dreaded going to the rambling Inn alone. Yet the darkness was slowly enveloping the crags and hillside about her. She tried to still the strange fright which was increasing within her by the minute. She tried to tell herself that what she called premonition, was hysteria and unhinged imagination. But it was no use. She was trembling from head to foot. And even before she saw Hundus shambling toward

her without his master, she was cold with an unnameable horror!

He stopped some fifty feet away, staring at her. Then he lifted his head and howled dismally. Almost like an actor, he hesitated after it, and eyed her to see the effect of his wail.

She lept toward him finally. "Hundus—where is your master! Where—" It was a cry of anguish, torn from her.

The brute slunk back, still staring.

For the moment, in her desperation, all memory of the cablegram had left her. She knelt beside the dog, appealing. "Hundus—where is he—"

The yellow-gold eyes of the dog seemed weighing what she was saying. They stared into hers. It was a brazen stare. With the swiftly oncoming night, their weird light seemed glowing strangely.

The guide-strap hung at his neck. There were bloodstains upon it!

Then the dog was shambling off slowly toward the crags. He looked back to see if Irma were following. And she remembered she had heard that dogs led help back to their masters, when their masters had fallen into trouble.

"All right, Hundus," she called. "I understand. You'll take me to him—" She was breathless with fear as she hurried after the hound. Then she caught up with him, gripped the strap, and as though she were blind, he led her . . .

At every step, the darkness grew deeper. There were no stars in the sky. Heavy clouds were gathering and blotting out the heavens. Irma heard herself calling, at first softly: "Grandpa—where are you—" And then her voice grew louder and echoed and re-echoed on the wind which wafted back to her. "Grandpa—for God's sake—what has happened to you?"

Hundus shambled forward. He was going faster now and Irma breathlessly followed. They swerved down a declivity. It was new to her. She had never been here before. Stygian blackness showed beneath them. Had her grandfather fallen over the cliff and landed here? She watched Hundus' sure footing and tried to keep from sliding forward and down. An abyss lay there with death at its bottom. Vaguely she saw the drop into the blackness of a canyon.

And then it seemed that they were underground. A tunnel; a grotto. The cavernous sides seemed upon them as they went forward. She could feel the pull of Hundus and now he was panting as he tugged her after him.

She called her grandfather over and over again. But there was no answer save the echo of her cries, sent back to her from the walls of the cave.

The hound gave a sudden lunge forward. It pulled her off balance and the leash was unloosed from her hold. "Hundus—wait—" she gasped.

But he was gone. Tears rushed to her eyes. The darkness was so great, she could not see her hand before her face. There were heavy, evil smells here—of sodden earthy depths they must have entered, perhaps without outlet at this other end. She wanted to call her grandfather again, or Hundus, but fear choked the sounds her voice would make.

SUDDENLY she stopped short. Those eyes! They were here before her! Eyes here in the darkness. Hundus? Or Lester? The realization that she could not tell which, gripped her with a new sinister fear! Surely they must be Hundus' eyes, as he looked that night, peering in her doorway . . .

Then she heard, muffled, the howl of the brute—the soft wailing howl, almost questioning. Had he found her grandfather and was he leading her to him? The dog was not more than twenty feet from her, if she judged correctly the sound and his eyes.

"Hundus," she called, and her voice choked in her throat. "Where are you?"

Then her flesh froze and her blood congealed with horror. For a voice, seemingly merging from a kind of growl into Lester's strange drawl, answered her. "So you've come, Irma? I knew that you would."

She cried out and tried to back away. She stumbled over the uneven rock of the cavern. Her hand was to her mouth to still the screams which rose frantically to her throat. Perhaps she could escape him. She could see nothing but his eyes.

"Irma," he said curtly, "do not try to get away. I can see you. I see as well in the dark as in the light. You're trapped, my dear. I'm here to collect that debt you owe me. I've had enough from your family. We're going to settle now."

"Lester—" she stammered finally—"Where is Hundus?"

"Hundus?"

"The dog. And my grandfather. You've killed my grandfather. I know it. And that dog—you sent it—"

Still she was backing away, her body trembling from head to foot, her voice wavering.

"Yes. I trained and sent the dog to you." He was closer now. She saw that his sardonic eyes were roving her, his pace accelerating until suddenly she swung about with her back to him and tried to dash up the declivity and from the cavernous depths to which Hundus had brought her.

But she heard Sands' laughter as he easily overtook her and dragged her back. He swung her under his arm as easily as if she had been a doll.

She whispered. "You're hurting me! Let me go. Stop—for God's sake—" Hot tears rolled down her cheeks, as he tossed her down to one side of the cave.

"I live here," he said triumphantly. "It's my home. Now it will belong to you and me. See? Is that comfortable there? I have piled it with cushions for you—"

"You're a fool," she cried. "How long do you think it would take the police to find us and to throw you into jail?"

His chuckle made her shudder. "I have an effective disguise for you and me, my dear. We shall never be discovered—or recognized—"

She felt his hot breath close beside her, as he stretched himself lengthwise. She tried to move away, but his hands gripped her and drew her to him. Again she knew the horror of his cloying moist kisses, his terrific strength, which made her helpless in his grasp.

"I have things to teach you," he murmured. "Adventure, freedom, the thrills of wild nights, when we shall skulk along and catch our prey—"

He was mad. Crazy. His words were those of an insane man. And she was at his mercy. "Let me go—or I'll scratch your eyes out," she cried.

"Biting is more fun," he leered. Then she felt a sudden sharp pain. Her throat was warm from the foul heat of his breath, and the stinging pain from the impact of his sharp teeth.

Her revulsion steadied her. She must get out of here. But she would never be able to escape, if she kept up this hysteria. She must stall for time. Distract him.

"Lester, why did you send the dog?"

"The dog? Oh, I trained him carefully myself. He lived here, and I came every day to work with him. I had to train him to take your grandfather about."

At the mention of her grandfather, her fears for him rose above her own danger. "My grandfather—where is he—"

"WHERE is he?" he said with a fiendish chuckle. "That is no interest of mine. He has never treated me well. Ten years ago, I was interested in your mother—she was beautiful with soft white skin like yours—and he sent me

away. I came back for my revenge. He got rid of me again. And now—your grandfather is dead—one of those unhappy accidents. He fell over the abyss coming down the declivity here. And you—you are just for me. By tomorrow, we shall put on our disguise, and your bestial loyalty will make you cling to me—"

"My grandfather—dead!" A flood of anguish swept her. She hardly heard Lester's words. "I don't mind watching you cry," he said. "Suffering and passion are very akin. Anger and passion are akin, too, it fires me to watch you. And my love will fire you in turn. . . . When I watched at night, through your window, and saw your human body, shimmering, voluptuous, I laughed to think you could not know that my eyes see as well in the dark as the light. You'll be that way too—after our disguise—" He laughed, as though this were a joke which only he could understand.

A madman! Her terror blurred her so that she could catch no meaning from his ghastly words.

"But we must make haste," he said ironically.

"Take your hands off me!" She was kicking wildly, trying to release herself. But the actuality of her powerlessness, of his ultimate triumph, never left her. She was at his mercy.

"Bite me," he urged. "After tonight, often we shall play that way—"

Then suddenly she heard him gasp. In the darkness, his body pressing her was horribly shaking. Sweat from him was moist against her.

"Why—little Irma—" he panted. "You lie quiet—I'll be right back."

A ghastly paroxysm was upon him; he twitched, gasping as though he were strangling. Then he had flung himself away from her. He was gone—but the darkness yielded sounds most horrible: ghastly, hideous indescribable sound . . .

Her head was whirling. Was she screaming? She found herself struggling to her feet—turning, staggering, then running in the darkness away from those horrible sounds.

"George—"

Then suddenly she was aware of an answering call:

"Irma! Is that you? Irma, dear—"

Blurred, muffled—George's voice! And now there were little pinpoints of stabbing light up the black, underground slope. Waving flashlights. And other men's voices—a group of villagers, coming with George to find her.

And then George had her in his arms. "Irma darling—you're safe. When I found you and your grandfather gone—and that damn dog—we came after you. Found a crumpled cablegram—then heard your scream—"

It was all right now. Hysterically she clung to him; his protecting arms held her nude, shuddering body against him.

"It was Lester—" she murmured. "Lester Sands—he caught me here. He—he's here now, somewhere—"

The gathered men caught at her words. George slung his coat about her.

"There he goes!" someone shouted.

"Easy—don't shoot!" another warned. "That's a dog—look at him go! He's sure scared of us—"

The tawny shape, with flattened ears, tail between its legs and body low to the ground as it fled, blurred into the darkness and was gone.

One of the men laughed. "Scared pie-eyed." And he added wonderingly, "Now what in hell would a dog be doing here in this damn place?"

What indeed? What Irma Low was thinking, she dared whisper only to George. To him it was horrible. To these other men it would have been incredible. There are so many ghastly things that none of us will ever comprehend!

MODELS FOR THE PAIN SCULPTOR

By RUSSELL GRAY

Because she was beautiful, Clara Craig was dead. But Leah Voorhis didn't know that and so she doomed herself and the man who loved her . . . to become Models for the Pain Sculptor!

CHAPTER ONE

A Job With Satan

THE YOUNG MAN was very shy. Leah Voorhis was used to having men dazed by the impact of her beauty, but this man looked as if he would be ill-at-ease in the presence of any attractive girl.

"Are you Miss Voorhis?" His drawl was distinctly Western. "I'm Miles Craig, Clara Craig's brother."

Leah flashed him her most charming smile and opened the door of her tiny studio wide. "Do come in. I was just about to leave, but I have a few minutes to spare."

She herself was tall, but he towered a full head over her. His frame was loose-

A Novelette of Weird Menace

jointed; he advanced awkwardly into the room as if he were afraid he would knock something over.

"Clara often mentioned her handsome cowboy brother," Leah said.

Craig blushed like a schoolgirl. "I came to New York because I was worried about Clara. I'm her only kin and one of the boys showed me a picture of her in a magazine and—" he gulped with embarrassment— "well, Miss, she wasn't wearing anything. I don't think that's right. I—"

He broke off and turned a beet-red. He had happened to glance around while talking and noticed the pictures on the wall. They were reproductions of paintings and prize-winning photographs of

Leah, and most of them showed her in the nude or semi-nude. Modestly, Miles Craig dropped his eyes.

Leah laughed. "I suppose now you think me a fallen woman."

"Well, Miss, I—that is—well, I wouldn't say that," he floundered.

"Look, Mr. Craig," she said. "I am a professional model and so is your sister Clara. We are not ashamed of our bodies, and at the same time we are as respectable and as modest as any girl you know. Posing in the nude is very impersonal with us."

"Sure, I guess so," he drawled unhappily. "I'm not saying anything against you, Miss, or against Clara, either. Why I came to you, Miss, is this. I can't find Clara. Two days ago I came to New York and went straight to the place where she lives with another girl, also a model, named Audrey Driscoll. Well, Miss, neither of them have been seen in two weeks. There's something funny about it. The landlady told me their rent's been paid a month in advance, but she hasn't seen hide or hair of them for two weeks. She let me into their rooms and dishes were still in the sink and the beds weren't made and their clothes were in the closet."

Leah frowned. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen them either. Clara, Audrey and I are very close friends. If they had left for a long trip, they certainly would have let me know."

"I'm worried bad, Miss. I didn't like Clara to come here to New York to live alone. If anything happened to her, it'll be my fault."

She touched his arm. "Don't let it worry you. Clara can take care of herself better than most men."

BUT she herself felt uneasy. She recalled how two weeks ago Clara had told her that she and her roommate, Audrey Driscoll, had both received offers to pose for Darnell Reeg, the sculptor, at better than usual rates. That was the last she had seen of either of the girls. And this morning Reeg had communicated with her, hiring her at the same high rates, to pose for him at his country studio. Reeg's car was waiting downstairs for her now to take her there.

"Yes, Miss, I reckon it's just the strange city that makes me jittery," Miles Craig was saying.

His glance stole up to one of the oil reproductions in which Leah reclined nude on a sofa. With rich pigments the artist had brought out the contrast between her long black hair and black eyes and the milk-whiteness of her skin. Her breasts were high and round, her legs and thighs long and tapering.

He saw that she was looking at him and hastily he focused his eyes at his feet.

"I'll have to run along now," she told him. "I hope you'll visit me when I have more time."

"I sure will," he said fervently.

Downstairs a long black sedan was waiting for her. The chauffeur threw the door open at her approach. Leah Voorhis waved good-by to Miles Craig and got into the back seat. The car moved forward.

The chauffeur had extremely thin shoulders which were hunched far over the wheel. Scraggly dirty-grey hair curled down the back of his neck. Only once during the trip did he look back at her and she saw a face that was like a living skull. Blood-shot eyes sunk deep in bony sockets pierced into her, stripped the clothes from her in cold appraisal. His fleshless lips twitched in a ghost smile of satisfaction.

Leah shrank inwardly, feeling something slimy crawl over her heart. Clara Craig and Audrey Driscoll had gone to pose for Reeg and had, apparently, never come back.

With a wave of her head she dismissed her fears. How did she know they hadn't returned from Reeg's studio? They might have gone out to another job in another city at such short notice that they hadn't had time to straighten out their rooms and say good-by to their friends.

An hour's drive brought the car to Darnell Reeg's home on the south shore of Long Island. It was early afternoon, but a heavy mist rolling in from the ocean gave an eerie other-world effect to the one-story modernistic building. The driver pulled the sedan up to the front door and got out. He was very tall and built like a rail. Mist swirled around his shoulders and gave Leah an impression of a disembodied skull floating in space. Restraining a shudder, she stepped out through the door.

Darnell Reeg was waiting for her in the house. She had seen him before at parties and exhibitions, but this would be the first time she had ever posed for him. He was a short, stocky man with a head too small for his body and the emaciated face and blazing eyes of a fanatic.

"Ah, Miss Voorhis," he greeted. "I have always aspired to use the most beautiful model in New York."

He took her hand in his, and she felt a limp, clammy palm. Suddenly she recalled that he had a reputation for bizarre sculpture, a specialist in the weird and unorthodox. Only yesterday she had read in the art columns of a porcelain figure of his at the Trojan Galleries which was setting the critics on their ears. Through their hymns of praise over the power and realism of his technique, there had run a strain of horror.

She pulled a cigarette out of her handbag and lit it with unsteady hands. Reeg watched her through half-closed lids.

"I should like to get started as soon as possible," he told her. "Mario will show you to a room where you can wash up and undress."

The gaunt man was behind her. He stalked past her down a hall. Fighting down her qualms, she followed. Again she told herself that there was nothing to be afraid of. Darnell Reeg was a sculptor of international reputation and, as far as she knew, there had never been a hint of scandal against his name.

Mario opened a door and she stepped past him into a severely modern bedroom. The door closed behind her.

On the low bed lay a pink dressing gown. The sight of it restored her confidence. Everything was according to rote.

SHE pulled her dress over her head. Clad in brassiere and panties, she sat down at the dressing table and combed her long black locks and applied a fresh coat of make-up. She was fumbling at the hooks of her brassiere when suddenly the shrill voice of a girl rang out. Leah's fingers froze.

"I want to go home! You have no right to keep me here!"

The voice was just outside the door in the hall.

"You are acting very childish, my dear," Darnell Reeg replied smoothly. "I assure you that there is no reason to be frightened."

"Let me out of here!"

"Mario!" Reeg barked.

Leah rose to her feet and hurried across the room. She heard a stifled cry, and then there was the sound of a heavy object falling. When her hand was on the knob, she heard a door slam shut. The next moment she had her own door wide open. The hall was empty.

As she stood there with her own heart beating so loud that she could hear it, the door to the next room opened and Reeg stepped into the hall. He was rubbing his hands and breathing heavily.

When he saw her, he clamped a weak smile on his lips.

"It serves me right," he said. "I hired an inexperienced model simply because she had an interesting figure. When I informed her that I wanted to sculp her nude figure, she balked and became hysterical."

Leah said nothing. She stared at the sculptor, wondered why the door to the next room had slammed and what had happened to the girl and Mario.

Reeg was evidently aware of her train of thought. He said: "Naturally I threw her out. I told her in no uncertain terms that I wanted no more of her. Mario is taking her home now."

"Is he?"

Reeg laughed through his nostrils. "You don't imagine—my dear girl, come and I'll show you the departure."

His soft, clammy hand closed over her bare elbow. She realized that she hadn't her dress on, but she went anyway. She had to know.

Side by side they went up the hall. He opened the door. Mario was just turning the car around. In the back seat she glimpsed a white dress.

Suddenly she felt quite foolish. She turned to Reeg with an apology on her lips, but she didn't utter it. His blazing eyes were on her, not in the objective way in which an artist looks at a model, but with brazen intimacy.

She walked rapidly away from him down the hall.

"I'll be ready for you in a short time, Miss Voorhis," he called after her. "Finish undressing. You may rest until I call you."

Back in her room she shed her remaining garments. She needed a cigarette to calm her jumpy nerves, and when she went to look for her handbag in which she had a package, she remembered that she had left it on the table in the foyer. She stepped into her shoes and put on the pink robe.

In the hall it struck her that perhaps after all she hadn't seen a girl in the back of the black sedan. She had glimpsed only a patch of white which might not have been a dress—or not a girl inside of the dress. Reeg's story had been unconvincing. Certainly no girl consciously accepting a job to model would refuse to pose in the nude. And what had been the reason for that stifled scream and the sound of a body falling? And what did the slamming of the door a moment later mean?

She turned away from the front of the house and walked noiselessly toward the room next door to hers. The house was utterly silent; as silent as the mist which held it in its embrace.

Slowly she turned the knob and pushed the door in. The room was devoid of furnishings save for a pedestal in the center. A figure which rested on the pedestal brought a startled cry of horror to her lips.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction to Horror

FOR one awful moment Leah imagined that it was a human body convulsed in a position of unendurable agony. Then she saw that it was a life-sized porcelain statue of such perfect craftsmanship that even her professional gaze had been deceived.

When she stood over the figure, she gave another start. Clara Craig had posed for it; and so keen had the eye of the sculptor been for detail that Leah had an uncomfortable sensation that she was actually looking at the nude body of Clara frozen forever in that position. In spite of the translucence of the delicate porcelain, she almost expected to feel flesh as she stretched out a hand. The surface

was remarkably smooth and hard to her touch.

Yet the exquisite horror of the statue continued to hold her gaze with a sort of sickening fascination. The kneeling figure was seated on her heels with torso leaning far back from the hips at an impossible angle and head flung backward between the shoulders. The mouth was wide in a wordless scream of pain and the face expressed such suffering as could only be experienced in hell. Indeed, every line and curve and muscle was eloquent of inhuman agony—the full breasts which still gave an effect of quivering, the banded, straining muscles taut under the white skin of thigh and abdomen, the illusion wrought of lights and shadows of flesh crawling with torment.

"You like my statue?"

Darnell Reeg, his stubby body now covered with an artist's smock, advanced into the room through the open door.

Leah bit her lips. "It's a masterpiece. And yet so utterly horrible."

He nodded with satisfaction. "That is what the critics have said. Horror, the handmaid of beauty. Certain critics have pretended to be disgusted, but they could not deny the strange spell of my figure. And, of course, the marvelous workmanship is obvious."

She kept staring at the statue. Reeg had missed no slightest nuance or overtone of Clara's voluptuous body. It was all there, the delicate texture of the skin, the strands of her wavy hair falling down behind her from her head, even a nerve caught as it throbbed against the stretched skin of her throat. And especially the agony.

"How could she have held that position?" Leah asked.

"It required only an instant," Reeg replied.

"But I don't see how any model could have got herself into that pose. It's impossible."

"Not quite," Reeg said softly.

She faced him, conscious of the return of fear. "Am I expected to assume some such pose?"

"My dear girl, the pose you are to maintain is strictly my concern. You are being paid to model. I am ready to start work. Come with me."

She followed him out of the room. As she shut the door, she asked: "What has become of Clara Craig who posed for that figure?"

He shrugged: "She was paid—and paid well, I may add—and then departed. I have no personal interest in the girls who work for me."

He opened another door across the hall and she found herself in a large studio. The sight of the wire armature and the modelling clay and the model's pedestal reassured her. She was on familiar ground which she had covered many times before.

"You will take your position," he instructed her.

She stepped on the pedestal. "Will I wear any costume?"

"Nothing."

SHE kicked off her shoes and opened her robe. As she was about to slip it down her shoulders, she hesitated. She had done this scores of times before without the slightest qualm, always maintaining an impersonal attitude as if the artist were a machine rather than a real man; yet now she was reluctant to reveal her body before Reeg. She looked at him and saw that he was occupied with heaping clay about the tiny armature. This normal occupation on his part restored her confidence. She dropped her robe.

He turned his eyes on her. She was accustomed to artists, in their professional role, staring long and searchingly at her uncovered body, but never with the intense, fanatical, intimate gaze of Reeg. She took a step backward, shivering.

"Sit down," he said.

She dropped down on the cloth-covered pedestal.

"No, not like that," he snapped. "Here, I'll show you."

He strode over to her and she felt the clamminess of his hands on her shuddering flesh. He had no right to touch her. She was about to protest when she again looked at his eyes and decided that it would be best to endure his repulsive touch for the moment than enrage him. Once she left this house, she resolved, no money could induce her to pose for him again.

"Here, sit on your legs," he ordered. "Like this. Turn your hips further to the side and look over your left shoulder as if you were seeing something that frightened you."

Finally he retreated a few steps and studied her. "Perfect," he muttered. "You are the most beautiful model I have ever had. You shall be my masterpiece."

For a long time he worked with the clay, building up a small model no more than a foot high. And as the figure emerged under his dexterous fingers, she saw that, while it was in her posed position, there was a vital difference. Where she sat in an attitude of relaxation, the small figure was that of a girl in the throes of torment.

He noticed the puzzled expression on her face and laughed. "This is simply a working model, my dear. The actual figure will be precisely your size."

Reeg swung toward the door as bare feet pattered in the hall. A moment later the sound of heavy shoes slapping the wooden floor followed. A girl whimpered, then screamed.

Leah bounded up just as the door swung inward and a naked girl plunged into the room. The girl glanced about frantically, like a hunted, cornered animal. Behind her came Mario, his face twisted with rage.

"She broke away," Mario panted. "It wasn't my fault."

"Brenda!" Leah shouted, recognizing Brenda Morse, an artist's model whom she knew casually.

Brenda's eyes widened with terror. "You, Leah! Oh, God, they have you too!"

Mario was almost on her. She slipped away from his outstretched hands and raced over to the artist's pedestal where Leah threw a protective arm about her.

"Take it easy, Mario," Reeg said quietly. "They can't get away."

Sparks glinted in the sculptor's eyes as he moved toward the pedestal on which the two nude girls stood: Leah tall and defiant, indignation leaving no room for fear in her bearing; Brenda, a delicate little thing, with her head hardly reaching to Leah's shoulder, trembling violently at Leah's side.

"This is outrageous," Leah said. "Come, Brenda, we'll get our clothes and leave at once."

"They won't let us!" Brenda moaned. "We're doomed. They're going to do the same thing to us as to Clara Craig and Audrey Driscoll. I saw the kiln. I—"

"Take the little one out of here," Reeg snapped. "And bring the whip."

BOTH girls screamed then, and a second later they were fighting the two men. Reeg pulled Leah off the pedestal and hurled her brutally to the floor. She lay there with the breath knocked out of her, her breasts heaving. Mario had swung Brenda up in his arms and was carrying her threshing body out.

Reeg stood over Leah, waiting—for a whip! God, no, it was impossible. She must get out of here to save herself and bring help for Brenda.

Abruptly she moved, twisting up to her knees and driving forward. Her head hit Reeg squarely in the stomach. He grunted hollowly and stumbled about, gasping for

breath. Leah leaped up and rushed to one of the wide French windows. She heard Reeg wheezing behind her. Then she was through the window, her bare feet alighting on ground two or three feet below the sill. She ran.

Mist swirled around her, cool and moist on her perspiring flesh. The mist blotted out the late afternoon sun, blotted out direction. There was nothing before her save a void, but she continued to race into it until her feet touched water. In front of her stretched the ocean. She turned to her right, raced along the shore. Sharp pebbles slashed into her bare soles.

A breeze lifted the mist somewhat, and looking back she could see the low outline of the house directly behind her. She had run away from it at an angle and now was returning to it in a line with the shore. Reeg was dashing toward her from the direction of the house.

"Mario!" he shouted. "There she is."

Mario's gaunt shape rose out of the mist fifty feet ahead of her. Between the ocean and the two men she was trapped. She hesitated, then boldly waded out into the breakers.

The tide was low and it seemed that she had to wade for miles before the water was deep enough for swimming. Just as she was about to plunge into the waves, thin arms wound themselves around her waist. She was yanked off her feet and pulled under the water. She struggled, fighting Mario's grip as well as the water which was choking her. Under the water she was dragged, her head emerging for air only when the water became shallow. By that time there was no resistance left in her.

Sputtering, choking, she could do nothing but squirm feebly in Mario's arms as he carried her back to the house. Reeg trotted at the thin man's side.

Back once more in the studio room, Mario dumped her on the floor like a sack of meal. She sat up, shivering. Water which slid from her smooth skin formed a moist patch on the wooden floor.

"Get into dry clothes, Mario," Reeg was saying. "I'll be able to handle this hell-cat alone."

Mario left.

"What are you going to do to me?" Leah wailed.

"Nothing, immediately, if you will do as you're told," Reeg responded. "Now assume the same pose you were in when we were interrupted.

"No! I demand that you let me go home. You can't make me stay against my will."

SHE screamed as she saw Reeg pick from a table a black rubber object an inch thick and three inches wide and two feet long. It had a heavy wooden handle.

"This will teach you to obey," he informed her, "and it won't leave the slightest blemish on your skin."

She was half-way up to her feet when the first blow struck. It slapped with terrific force on her back and knocked her down on her face. She felt as if her spine had been caved in. Again the lash descended, and again.

She lay face down on the floor, gnawing at her arm, her screams coming hoarse and muffled. The pain was greater than she had ever imagined pain could be. Her body was a mass of maddening pain. And even when the lash ceased to descend, the pain continued.

"Five," Reeg said above her. "Will you obey now or do you want five more? I can keep this up all day if you continue to be obstinate."

She grovelled on the floor, waiting in an agony of suspense for the next blow. And when it came she knew that anything would be better than having to endure more of that torture.

She flung herself on her back. "I—I'll do it."

He nodded and dropped the lash on the

table and walked over to his modelling stand. Every nerve and muscle throbbing, she dragged herself over to the modelling stand and resumed the pose.

Silently Darnell Reeg moulded the tiny clay figure. And Leah, as her body continued to twitch with pain and wracking sobs still rasped from her throat, knew that he hadn't lured her here and beaten her simply to make that clay model of her. For her what had happened up to now was merely a brief introduction to horror.

CHAPTER THREE

A Handful of Ashes

TOWARD evening Miles Craig stood outside the Trojan Galleries on Fifty-seventh Street. A paragraph in an evening newspaper art column had pointed out that the model for Darnell Reeg's masterpiece ought to receive a share of the credit because of her ability to have achieved and maintained so difficult a pose. The model's name was mentioned: Audrey Driscoll.

Craig hadn't much hope that a statue for which his sister's roommate had posed could help him find Clara, but by this time he was ready to try anything that looked remotely like a lead.

Hat awkwardly in his hands, he entered the galleries. A stunningly clad hostess smiled benignly at him and handed him a program. His feet sank in heavy carpets as he found himself in the first gallery. Nothing but paintings here and he was looking for sculpture. He was about to pass into the next room when a large oil canvas caught his eye. He stopped before it, his pulse suddenly throbbing.

Leah Voorhis had posed for it. Nude, save for a wisp of transparent shawl over her shoulders, she stood tall and slender, her right knee bent a little, her breasts out-thrust, a Mona Lisa smile on her red lips.

He was snapped out of his gaping trance by snickers. An elderly man and woman were looking at him and laughing.

Blushing to the tips of his ears, he hurried his tall, loose-jointed body into the next room. This room was also filled with paintings. He didn't so much as glance at them, his mind full of the image of Leah Voorhis. He hadn't imagined that any girl could be so beautiful.

Most of the people were in the third room. They were strangely hushed as they stood about a life-sized translucent porcelain figure enclosed by a slender railing. As Craig moved over the carpet, he sensed the subdued horror in the air, and when he looked at the figure he understood the reason.

The figure of a lovely young girl lay on its back with palms flat on the base, raising her nude, pain-contorted torso slightly from the hips. The thighs were drawn up, muscles bulging; the head lolled on the left shoulder, the face a nightmare of suffering. Craig had seen persons in agony, but never as intense as this; never when the moment of severest anguish had been captured for all time.

"I have never seen anything so exquisite, so perfect," a bearded man whispered to a woman at his side. "And to have accomplished it in porcelain! I do not believe that the Ming porcelain at its best can compete with this. Notice its thinness, like the merest whisper of a shell, yet it gives a powerful impression of physical substance and bulk."

The woman repressed a shudder. "Darnell Reeg must be a monster."

"Or a genius," the bearded man commented. "It amounts to the same thing. Human anguish has always been a fit subject for genius. Consider the Laocoon group. Consider Dante's *Inferno*. I hear that Reeg is creating similar figures. He plans to make a group under the general heading of *Purgatory*."

Craig moved away, feeling slightly sick

and greatly bewildered. How in the world could Audrey Driscoll have forced her muscles to have assumed that pose? Had her disappearance any connection with that hellish statue? If so, possibly Clara was also tied up with it in some way. The bearded man had said that Darnell Reeg was working on similar figures. . . .

As he strode through the first room, he glanced again at the nude of Leah Voorhis. He wondered how soon he would see her.

FROM the receptionist Craig obtained Darnell Reeg's address on the pretense that he might offer the sculptor a commission. Then he hurried out and took a taxi to Pennsylvania Station.

Darkness had dispelled the mist when Miles Craig took long strides up the walk to Reeg's house. The moon rising over the horizon sent a shimmering silver ribbon over the ocean. The scene was one of idyllic tranquillity. As he rang the bell, he told himself that doubtless he had come on a wild goose chase.

A long minute passed before the door opened slowly inward. A man as tall as himself with half the width in the shoulders inquired: "Yes?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Reeg."

"Sorry. He is never interrupted while working."

"Maybe you can help me out," Craig said. "Did a model named Clara Craig work for him recently?"

"I can't say. There are so many models. Neither I nor Mr. Reeg make any attempt to keep track of their names."

"What about a model named Audrey Driscoll?"

The thin man's face was as impassive as a death's-head and looked like one. He said: "I don't believe so."

Craig knew then that the man lied. The model who had done so excellent and difficult a job for Reeg as to have received mention by the art critics would not be so quickly forgotten.

Mario started to close the door. Craig stretched out a big hand held it open. "Hold it, brother. I want to see Reeg himself. This is damn important to me."

"I told you he's too busy. Come back some other time."

Craig's eyes had moved past him into the foyer, and suddenly they stopped, concentrating on the lady's black handbag which lay on a table. On its surface two silver initials stood three inches high: "LV."

"All right, then," Craig drawled. "I want to see Leah Voorhis."

Mario followed his gaze to the handbag. "Who's she?"

"That's her handbag."

The bloodless lips smirked. "You mean the initials. That belongs to the model with whom Mr. Reeg is now working. Her name happens to be Lila Vaughan."

Craig felt suddenly ridiculous. He hadn't anything more than the vaguest sort of hunch that Reeg was in any way involved in the disappearance of his sister and her roommate.

He said: "Sorry to bother you, brother. Maybe I'll drop around again tomorrow."

Craig turned and started down the walk. He hadn't taken more than a dozen steps when he stopped. In his mind's eye he saw Leah Voorhis tucking that bag under her arm as she had left her studio with him. Or at any rate, a bag just like it. It was conceivable that there was another model with a handbag like that and with identical initials. But it wasn't likely.

Suppose Leah actually were posing for Reeg, why should the thin man have lied about it?

He walked into the shadows, then skirted around to the side of the house. As the house was one story, he could easily glance into each window.

The first window he peered into showed him a modernly furnished bedroom illu-

minated by a single dim light. It was empty. He was about to turn away when he noticed the green dress neatly laid out on the bed. Over a chair at a dressing table were a woman's frilly underthings and sheer stockings.

Leah had been wearing a green dress. Perhaps it was once again coincidence, but as they piled on each other the coincidences became more and more improbable.

Soundlessly he moved to another lighted window. Maybe he was about to make a fool of himself. If Leah were actually posing for Reeg and he was caught peeping in on her, he would never again be able to face her.

THROUGH a second window he saw a large artist's studio, softly lit by indirect lamps. Nobody was in it. At the foot of the raised platform lay a pink robe and a pair of woman's shoes. The model had evidently discarded them when she had stepped up to the platform to pose. Why should she have left without having put the robe on again? Her clothes, evidently, were still in the bedroom. Would Leah be going about stark naked in this house?

He pushed one of the French windows open, climbed over the sill. And then, on the artist's modelling stand, he saw the foot-high clay figure. The face was that of Leah. The tall, perfectly proportioned body was convulsed with agony—a model for one of the figures in Reeg's group to be called *Purgatory*.

Certain now that Leah was in the house, that the servant had lied about her presence, and that she had gone naked from this room to another, he went resolutely in search for her. He didn't care who saw him now or what the consequences would be.

He found himself in a hall. The first door he came to he opened. There was no light in the room, but enough moonlight came in through the windows to reveal the single life-sized statue which had the entire room to itself. He found a switch on the wall, snapped it. As indirect light flowed over the room, a choked gasp rumbled in his throat.

The figure was that of his sister Clara. The reproduction of her body in a position of intolerable suffering was the second of Reeg's statues. The two girls who had posed for them had vanished—and now Leah was evidently posing for the third.

As Leah had done several hours ago, he touched the smooth translucent porcelain to assure himself that it was not semi-transparent skin stretched over a frame. And at that moment a girl screamed stridently in another part of the house.

He spun around, and as he did so his elbow struck the statue a hard blow. The thin porcelain figure toppled on its base. He himself, being momentarily off balance, moved with it. In an effort to right himself, his upper arm hit the head of the statue. The additional pressure was sufficient to send it crashing over on its side. It smashed into a thousand bits.

He gaped down at the pieces, appalled by the destruction even of a thing of horror like that. If his reasoning had been all wrong, if Reeg had had nothing to do with the disappearance of Clara and Audrey, and if this was simply another posing job as far as Leah was concerned, there would be hell to pay. That figure must be worth many thousands of dollars.

Suddenly he dropped down on his knees among the shattered fragments. Scattered on the floor and flecking the delicately curved insides of the pieces were ashes. He ran his fingers over them, picked up a tiny handful to make sure. Yes, ashes, imprisoned inside the porcelain figure. How had they got there and why?

Slowly he rose to his feet, numb with

nameless horror as the thought entered his dazed brain that the ashes might be all that was left of his sister.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devil's Kiln

THE door flew open and the gaunt figure of the servant stood framed in the doorway. An automatic was clamped in his bony fingers. Rage twisted his face as he saw the shattered statue.

"Damn you!" he grated. "You ought to be killed for this. You'll be lucky if Mr. Reeg is satisfied with turning you over to the police."

Miles Craig kept his eyes fixed on the ugly black snout of the gun. "What have you done to Clara Craig?" he demanded harshly. "And where's Leah Voorhis?"

"So you're going to make trouble? Maybe I better. . . ."

The gun rose, and at the same instant Craig left his feet. His big, raw-boned body shed its clumsiness as he dove under the gun which roared against his eardrum. Mario hadn't had time to shift his aim; the bullet smashed a high pane in a window. Then Craig's shoulder striking the thin legs sent Mario back against the wall.

It wasn't an equal fight. Craig held Mario's gun-wrist with one hand while he clamped his other hand around the skinny throat. He shook the servant like a puppy.

"Now, damn you, you'll take me to Leah Voorhis!"

Steps sounded behind Craig. He twisted his head over his shoulder, saw a short, stocky man in an artist's smock come through the door, swinging a heavy rubber lash by a wooden handle. Craig saw the blow coming and tried to duck. The thick lash caught him below the shoulder blades with such impact that he dropped forward from the hips.

Before Reeg could get his arm back for a second blow, Craig had rolled off the thrashing body of the thin man and was getting up to his feet. The heavy rubber whipped across his face. Craig staggered backward, feeling as if his head had been lifted from his shoulders. Then he closed in again. Reeg stepped back, but Craig let his body fall forward and his hands wound about the sculptor's thick thighs. Both men went down, with Craig on top.

The pain across his back and face made Craig temporarily forget about Mario. He got his hands up to Reeg's windpipe, clamped down with his strong fingers, determined to choke the life out of the sculptor. Abruptly Craig fell sideways off the body and hit the side of the floor with his head. On the other side of his skull was a deep, bleeding furrow where Mario had brought the automatic down.

Groggily Craig tried to rise to his feet. He had got as far as his knees when a wallop from that dreadful lash dropped him.

Then the lash descended in quick succession, flattening him out against the floor, robbing him of his last ounce of strength. He was helpless to do anything but lay there in a welter of agony which covered his back with a mantle of livid fire.

Gradually he was sinking into unconsciousness when the torture ceased. Dimly he heard Reeg's voice: "No, I won't whip him to death, although he deserves it. Sneaking in here and destroying my most priceless creation! Why can't he make amends by being my model for another? I've never used a man."

Mario chuckled. "Say, why not him and that Voorhis girl for a single figure? And you can use that Brenda Morse to take Leah Voorhis' place."

"Splendid idea, Mario. Strip him. Let's see what he looks like."

UNABLE to lift a finger in his defense, Craig lay there while Mario tore the clothes from his body. Then he felt Reeg's clammy fingers probing his pain-wracked flesh.

"A magnificent specimen, Mario. Did you ever see such a physique? He and Leah Voorhis will make my supreme masterpiece. Let's tie him up before he recovers sufficiently to cause trouble."

Craig felt ropes pass around his arms and legs. Then Reeg and Mario each grabbed him under one shoulder and dragged him over the floor. They seemed to go a great distance, but actually it was only to another part of the house.

A girl cried out above him. The two released him and his chin smacked the floor.

"I've brought you a visitor," Reeg laughed.

Painfully Craig twisted himself over on his back. And he stared up at Leah Voorhis standing only a few feet away from him.

She looked exactly as in that painting he had seen in the art gallery—superb in the tall, slender voluptuousness of her nudity. Yet instead of a smile, her lips were quivering and terror crawled in the depths of her black eyes. Her arms hung limply at her side; around each wrist was an iron bracelet to which were attached chains running to iron hooks behind her in the stone wall.

Beside Leah another naked girl was similarly chained to the wall. She was considerably smaller than Leah, delicately curved, with a profusion of corn-colored hair hanging over rounded little breasts.

"Miles!" Leah wailed. "You came here to look for Clara?"

"And I found her," Craig gritted. "Or what was left of her, I think. That fiend murdered her and Audrey Driscoll, too."

"Murdered?" Reeg said. "Were the great Pharaohs of Egypt who sacrificed tens of thousands of lives to build their magnificent pyramids accused of murder? I capture the intrinsic beauty of my models and preserve it for all time." He scowled and kicked Craig savagely in the ribs. "One of my priceless figures you wantonly destroyed. Very well, you shall make up for it. . . . Mario, in line with your suggestion, I have another use for Leah. We shall use Brenda Morse for the pose intended for her. Bring the model I have made of Leah. It will serve."

"Let me go!" Brenda shrieked, writhing in her chains. "You're going to kill me!"

Reeg stepped toward her and ran a hand over her shuddering body. "How ungrateful you are when I intend to enshrine your loveliness so that it will live long after your flesh would have turned ugly with age and finally rotted with death."

From the moment Craig had been dragged into the room, he had been conscious of the great heat. Wearily now he lifted his head and saw the large kiln which took up half of the room. Of course the clay had to be baked in order to turn it into porcelain. And as he thought of the ashes which he had found inside the statue of his sister, he had an appalling inkling of her horrible fate and what he and Leah and Brenda were about to experience.

MARIO returned with the wooden base on which rested the small clay working model of Leah's figure. He placed it on a high table. Then both he and Reeg unlocked Brenda from her chains. She screamed, squirming and thrashing, but she was helpless in their grasps. Mario stepped away from her, picked up the heavy rubber lash, and set to work on her frail body until she was a groaning, twitching white splotch on the floor.

"Now get on here and assume the same pose as that clay model," Reeg ordered.

Between Craig and the kiln stood a

large sheet of slate from which two handles jutted out on each side. Whimpering and trembling with pain and terror, Brenda climbed on the slate. Reeg used his hands to push and pull and twist her into the same pose as that of the clay model. Then, still moaning, she sat there on her legs, with her head looking over her left shoulder and her hair streaming down her side.

"Perfect," Darnell Reeg gloated. "The needles, Mario."

The thin man brought two hypodermic needles from the table and handed one to Reeg.

It was only the memory of the lash which kept Brenda from breaking the pose. She crouched a little lower on the platform, a tremor quivering just under her skin, and her voice was shrill with panic.

"What are you going to do with that? Oh, God, please!"

With a quick motion Reeg jabbed the point of the needle into the top of her spine and pushed the plunger in a little way. Her voice died in her throat, although her mouth stayed open. She shuddered once more, slowly, then became strangely immobile. But her eyes remained capable of reflecting the panic which swirled within her.

Reeg gave the first hypodermic back to Mario and took the second from him. He stepped around Brenda and casually emptied its contents into her thigh.

What happened then was more nerve-chilling than anything that had gone before. The terror in her eyes gave way to pure agony. Her body started to convulse, but so gradually that it looked like an extremely slow motion picture. The first injection had deprived her of partial control of her muscles; the second caused such intolerable pain that her reflexes forced outraged nerves and tissues and muscles to writhe, however slowly. Little by little, her small, naked body was assuming a position of intolerable suffering.

Reeg used both his hands to keep her in the original pose, moulding her sluggishly controlled muscles like a sculptor working with clay. Intently his blazing eyes watched her. He stretched out a hand and Mario placed the first hypodermic into it. He put the point of the needle against her spine, waited until her agony had reached its apex, and then jabbed the plunger in.

Instantly she became absolutely rigid—a statue of torment.

Craig realized that throughout it all he had been unconsciously yelling curses and fighting his bonds, and that Leah had been screaming crazily and pulling hopelessly at her chains. Now both he and Leah grew silent as Darnell Reeg, with a little sigh of achievement, turned to them.

"THIS is only the first step," Reeg told them. "Now, of course, comes the hardest part, demanding the highest talent of a great artist. There is but one objection to working in porcelain and especially in using my method, and that is that the figure is so extremely fragile. On the other hand, it gives an incredibly lovely translucent surface. Although the technique is peculiarly my own, I admit that I owe something to the ancient potters. They used to work their clay around straw centers. When the vase was placed into the kiln, the heat, of course, turned the straw into ashes, leaving only the outer clay shell."

Leah's voice started again, low and hoarse now with despair.

Craig shouted: "Reeg, you fool, you can't get away with this. When your hellish method is discovered, it will be the chair for you instead of fame."

"Discovered?" Reeg's eyebrows arched. "What can be discovered? If, unfortunately, another of my figures will be shattered, there will be only a handful of ashes. I can say that I used a straw base.

I am glad to say, my dear man, that the kiln conclusively disposes of all evidence. Now to work."

Mario dragged a pot of extraordinarily fine clay over to the side of the rigid body of the girl. And then, with the ability of a master sculptor, Darnell Reeg set to work. With painstaking care he poured clay over the living body of the girl. He moulded with tools and sensitive fingers, following every line and curve and muscle until the entire figure, even to the hair, was covered with a layer of clay so fine and expertly applied that it was like a second skin.

Miles Craig lost all sense of time. Twice Mario came over to tighten the ropes around him. Struggle was futile, but to simply lie supinely would mean madness. Perhaps madness would come anyway before the swift consuming cremation in the kiln, but it would not matter to Reeg. He was interested only in the physical bodies.

Leah was slumping lower and lower from her chain, screams no longer able to come past her raw throat.

At last Reeg straightened up and wiped his hands on a cloth. "Finished, Mario," he said. "So far it is my best work. But when I work on those other two, you will really see something."

Mario threw the huge door of the kiln open. A blast of heat whipped out into the room. Then Mario and Reeg each lifted by two handles the slate sheet on which Brenda Morse's motionless clay-covered body rested and carried it to the kiln.

God, Craig thought. Was Brenda conscious of what was going to happen to her? Was she sitting there impotent to move, unable to give tongue to her despair, while her brain continued to function, knowing how terrible was to be her fate?

Carefully they slid the clay-covered girl through the door. Mario pushed the slate all the way in with a kind of long-handled rake, then slammed the door shut.

"In twenty-four hours the figure should be ready for glazing," Reeg chuckled. He rubbed his hands and turned to Craig and Leah. "And now we will prepare for my supreme effort."

CHAPTER FIVE

Satan Is a Sculptor

DARNELL REEG went to the table and refilled the hypodermic needles, then stepped over to where Miles Craig lay. Craig's torso arched from the floor in a final desperate attempt to break loose. Reeg dropped down on his knees behind him, dug his fingers into Craig's hair, and lifted Craig's head. As Craig thrashed, he scarcely felt the prick of the needle in the back of his neck. But almost at once he felt its result; a numbness stealing over him, turning his muscles to rubber. He fell back, panting.

"That was only a small shot," Reeg said. "It has left you only enough strength so that you can move under my direction. . . . Untie him, Mario."

As the thin man cut the bonds from Craig, Reeg went over to Leah. Her knees had bent to the floor; she hung from the chains with her arms stretched high over her head. Her eyes were closed.

"She can be handled without the needle," Reeg muttered. He brought out a key and unlocked the chains. She slumped in a white heap, all resistance sapped from her by the horror of what she had seen done to Brenda Morse.

Craig, on the other hand, still had some fight in him. As soon as the ropes were cut, he strove to get to his feet. He moved as if in a nightmare, getting up first on his hands and knees, then putting his hands against the wall and pulling himself up. Mario waited until he was swaying erect, then knocked him down.

It was an open-hand slap, but it was all that was necessary.

Mario left him and from a corner of the room pulled out another huge slate plate. By that time Craig had stumbled up to his feet once more. This time it was Reeg who knocked him down, with a flick of the lash.

"Mount the platform, both of you," Reeg ordered.

At his words Leah came to life. She leaped up.

"I'll kill myself first! Oh, God, please help us!"

A blow of the heavy rubber lash sent her sprawling on the floor. Methodically the lash rose and fell, while Leah threw herself from side to side and once again found her voice.

Craig jabbered curses and for the third time attempted to rise. It was utterly hopeless, but some inner spark would not let him submit meekly. This time Mario simply pushed him down with a flat hand against his chest.

Leah had started to crawl over to the slate, but the lash continued to rain down on her until she was on it. Blubbering, she followed Reeg's orders to sit up.

"Now you," Reeg said, striding over to Craig.

Craig continued to curse in a low, harsh tone. The whip descended. His semi-numb nerves seemed somehow more sensitive to pain. Each impact of the murderous rubber sent ten times the torment through him as it had in the other room. His determination to let Reeg flay the flesh from his bones rather than give in melted. The torture was needless; if necessary Mario and Reeg could carry him over to the platform weak as a year-old baby, he wouldn't be able to do anything about it.

As if there were a will outside of his own, he found himself crawling on his hands and knees. Then he was on the slate, feeling Leah's body shuddering against his side.

"Sit up and take her in your arms."

This was the easiest order to follow. Death was certain anyway; to hold her loveliness against him during the final dreadful moments would make it somewhat less hard to take. She threw her arms about him and she was sobbing and then her dry, trembling lips were against his.

REEG laughed and eyed them professionally. "A good pose if I went in for sentimentality, but I don't. Any competent sculptor can turn out a couple of embracing lovers. But to capture them in a lovers' embrace while they are suffering the agonies of the damned, that requires genius. . . . Shift your bodies to the side a little so that your torsos aren't glued together. And raise your heads so that your expressions will be seen."

With his hands he bent their bodies to his will. And they had to submit for fear of the lash. His clammy hands lingered on Leah's flesh.

"What a shame that this vibrant beauty will soon be turned to ashes," he murmured. "If I were less of an artist, I might be tempted to enjoy the living flesh for a while. . . . Mario, the needles."

"Please!" Leah whimpered. "Isn't there anything we can do to make you spare us? You can't be so inhuman."

When Craig saw the needle move around to his back, he roused himself once more, but his muscles responded too slowly, and it wouldn't have done any good anyway. Abruptly his paralysis increased. He could still stir, but so gradually now that he was hardly conscious of motion. And a moment later Leah also turned rigid in his arms. Her eyes were a trifle below his own, staring up at him, and in their black depths he saw the beginning of stark madness.

He felt Reeg molding his body into the

proper pose, saw him step in and out of his line of vision as the sculptor worked first on Leah and then on him.

Reeg reached his hand out to Mario for the second hypodermic needle—and suddenly Craig felt his blood turn to molten fire. In Leah's eyes madness had given way to unadulterated agony. And then he could think of nothing but his own pain —pain which had made the beating he had received from the rubber lash feel as nothing, greater pain than he had ever imagined was possible.

He sensed rather than felt that every atom of his body was contorting. As from far away he heard muffled screams, and he knew that they were coming from his and Leah's throat, but he was not conscious of screaming. And then his own pain-clouded eyes were on Leah's face, seeing her as if through a heavy veil. She was no longer like anybody he had ever known; no longer beautiful.

"Perfect!" he heard Reeg gloat.

And suddenly the pain stopped. Everything went completely dark; sound was cut off. He no longer felt Leah against him. Reeg had injected into his spine the complete dose of the paralyzing drug.

Only Craig's brain remained alive. He was like a disembodied spirit, existing as pure thought. Would he feel the heat of the kiln, the consuming fire? Or would his mind simply cease as his body turned into a handful of ashes?

Time lost its meaning because he had no way of keeping track of it. Well, it wasn't the worst possible way of going out. If only Leah didn't have to go with him. How incredibly beautiful she was! How warm and desirable she had felt in his arms! She had kissed him when he had mounted that slate. Did that mean that she loved him?

His brain laughed. What difference would it make now?

A film formed before him. He didn't believe it, tried to stare into it. How could that be when he was nothing but thought? Then the thinnest of sounds came to his ears and over his skin came a slight prickling sensation.

Wild hope shot through him. He waited, not daring to think. Little by little the film before his eyes was replaced by a mist, and then that drifted away and he saw Leah's face, still contorted with agony, shimmering in front of him. He heard Reeg say: "More clay, Mario. These compositions take three times as much as a single figure." And he felt a prickling tautness of the skin where it was covered with the clay and the harsh sensation of Reeg's hands and tools working on him.

AS STRENGTH seeped back, it required a tremendous effort of will for Craig to keep himself absolutely motionless. Reeg had made the mistake of injecting into him the same amount of paralyzing drug as he had into the girls, forgetting that Craig's bigger body and greater vitality would shed the effects more rapidly. In addition, the double figure required at least twice as much time as a single figure had, so that Craig had had a longer time in which to recuperate. Through an open door at his right Craig saw a vague glow of daylight seep in. Reeg must have been at work for many hours and he was not yet finished.

Reeg was delaying work on the faces until the last, which left Craig's face and eyeballs still uncovered by clay. He could see out of the corner of his eye, but at the same time he knew that he could not keep his eyeballs fixed much longer or his facial muscles static in that expression of agony.

But he had to wait for more strength. Across his vision appeared Mario dragging another huge pot of clay. And beyond him on the table Craig glimpsed Mario's automatic. Having no more need for it, Mario had carelessly tossed it on

the table so that it would not encumber him.

Suddenly Darnell Reeg's fanatic eyes appeared inches from Craig's. The sculptor was studying his features and frowning. He brought up a hand to feel Craig's face. And then Craig had to act.

Craig's movements were sluggish, retarded by the thin coat of clay which covered his body and the weakness which had not altogether left him. But he had the advantage of surprise. Reeg's mouth fell open. Craig's fist hit the sculptor's jaw.

The blow wasn't hard enough to knock Reeg down, but it gave Craig a chance to free his other arm from about Leah. He rose to his feet, the clay plastered to his skin cracking and parting. He plunged past Reeg, his shoulder striking Reeg's chest and sending him spinning.

Behind him he heard shouts, but he kept straight toward his objective, staggering as his cramped muscles protested against the sudden exertion. When he reached the table, he almost fell forward on his face, but he managed to get his fingers about the automatic and turn, leaning back against the side of the table.

Mario was almost on him—so close that Craig couldn't possibly miss. The muzzle of the gun was against Mario's body when Craig squeezed the trigger. Mario screamed and fell away. Craig brought the gun up higher and shot again. Mario's voice stopped abruptly as he went down.

Reeg had been right behind Mario. He managed to get his hand on Craig, but Craig had the gun. Darnell Reeg fell face first on the body of his servant.

For a lone time Miles Craig leaned back against the table, too tired to think or move. Finally he stirred himself sufficiently to go over to Leah. He could not yet rouse her.

He dragged himself out of the room. Through a window he saw the sun riding high over the ocean. He located a bathroom wiped the clay off himself as best he could, then took a hot shower. By the time he went in search of his clothes he felt almost normal.

Dressed again, he returned to Leah with an armful of towels and tenderly removed the clay. It was like working on a statue.

Several hours later her eyes closed and then opened again. Her facial muscles relaxed.

Horror melted out of her eyes and something appeared in them which made his heart pump wildly. She was no longer a statue. She was the most glorious example of womanhood he had ever seen. And now that the nightmare was over, he modestly averted his eyes from her nudity and blushed.

Not many minutes later the blush turned to a deep crimson when she was able to stand up and press her sweet lips against him.

THE END

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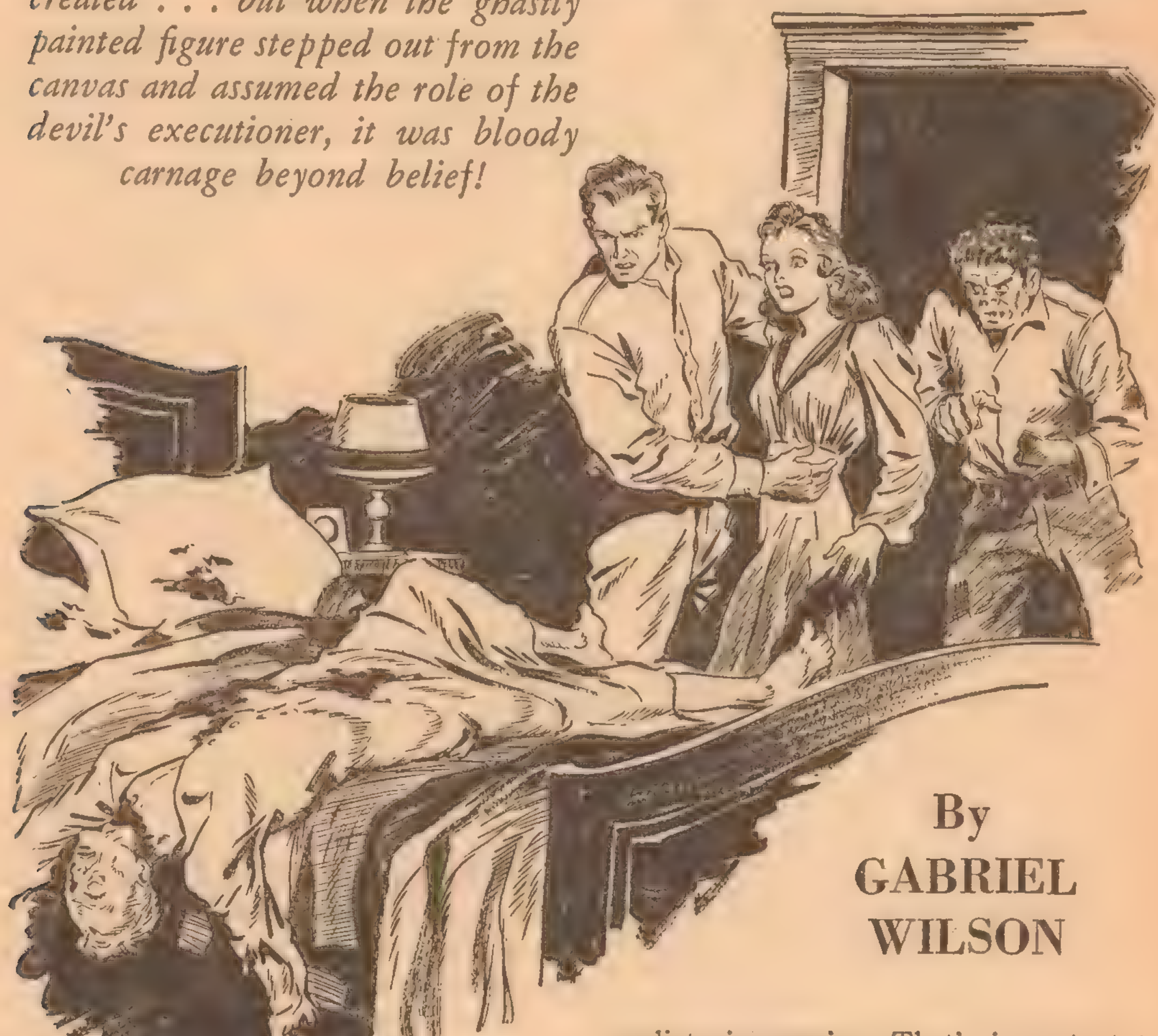
CORPSES FROM CANVAS

It was a fantastic and horrible picture that young Jack Blake had created . . . but when the ghastly painted figure stepped out from the canvas and assumed the role of the devil's executioner, it was bloody carnage beyond belief!



By
GABRIEL
WILSON

IN THE BIG, old-fashioned living room young Jack Blake moved the hooded light so that the circle of its illumination fell upon the shrouded canvas of the painting he had just finished. Grouped across the room, three other men, and a dark-haired, beautiful young girl, stared expectantly. Then one of the group—Robert P. Norton, publisher of art novelties—said softly:

"I want each of you to tell me his immediate impression. That's important to me in judging this thing."

"Ready?" Jack Blake murmured.

"Yes, go ahead," Norton said.

The room was dim, heavy with shadows. There was just the circle of yellow-white light upon the easel and the big canvas, with the stalwart, handsome young artist beside it. He hesitated another moment, and then he snatched away the shrouding cloth.

For a second there was only silence. Then Elsa Jarrod gasped: "Why, Jack! That's—that's horrible—ghastly. Why would you paint a thing like that?"

"Capital, Miss Jarrod!" Norton exclaimed with gratification. He was a

slender, dandified little fellow, with sleek grey-black hair and an effeminate waxed mustache. "That's just the reaction we want, eh, Jack? And what would you say, George?"

George Jarrod—Elsa's cousin—stared thoughtfully. "It gives me the jitters," he said at last. "But I seem to want to keep looking at it."

The painted figure was life-size. The background was just a grey suggestion of shadows which might be a street or a corridor, across which a shaft of light struck to disclose a furtive, hurrying figure—a man who was close in the foreground, as though about to shamble off the canvas. He was shabbily dressed; misshapen, with a twisted shoulder and a club-foot. The head was over-large, with the low, retreating forehead, and the pinched shape of a congenital degenerate. The light was brightest on the face. It was a face with twisted, grinning features; a slack-lipped mouth, with heavy grinning lips and a tongue that seemed licking them with diabolic glee. The little pig eyes gleamed with cunning. From the flat, low forehead, the bridge of a nose jutted out and then fell away, flat, leaving just the two nostril holes.

It was a grotesque face at which one might stare, fascinated by the horror of its murderous cunning; a gloating face. The creature's left hand was gone—his wrists was only a puckered, blue-red stump. He held it against his chest, holding something there which quite evidently he had just secured and which he greatly prized. His right hand, bluish, with claw-like twisted fingers, was outstretched. With it he was clutching another human hand—the bloody severed member of a recent victim. The severed hand was pink-white—the wrist a hacked horror of sawed bone, torn tendons and gory flesh, sparkling crimson in a ghastly trail.

"It fascinates you," young George Jarrod was murmuring. "It sure does. What's that he's holding against his chest?"

Jack Blake had crossed the room and was standing with the others, regarding his picture. "I don't know what he's holding," Blake smiled. "So I just left it vague—to stimulate the imagination. That's what you wanted, Mr. Norton?"

THE thing against the creature's chest was very small, held there by the puckered stump of his left wrist. A shadow crossed it, so that the little thing he seemed clutching so lovingly had been painted almost formless.

"He's cut off somebody's hand," Norton said. "You can use your imagination on that. He evidently lost his own hand, years ago—"

It seemed as though, staring at the furtive, scurrying figure, one might imagine the ghastly, twisted thoughts which were under that low, flat forehead. . . . A creature who had been mutilated, filled now with horrible desire to mutilate others—to make them like himself. Or with some mad thought that he needed this other hand, so that he had hacked it off and was carrying it now to his lair, his whole deformed body and degenerate mind gloating over his cleverness in obtaining it.

"You think I've done what you wanted, Mr. Norton?" Blake said. "You're satisfied with it?"

"It's perfect," Norton agreed. "Congratulations, boy."

"I don't see how you could bring yourself to—to paint such a thing," Elsa Jarrod murmured. "It—it seems alive with bloodthirsty horror."

Alive! Blake, regarding his picture from a distance, saw that the murderous figure did indeed seem almost too realistic. He had not realized before how good it was. Triumph filled him. The deal with Norton's art company would go through. It would bring him money and fame. He

and Elsa had been engaged for three months now; they would be married in another three.

They were in the living room of Elsa's home, where she and her cousin, George, lived with their wealthy old grandfather. Blake was spending a week with them. He had met Norton through George, who was employed by Norton's novelty art company. Together they had figured out this thing which ought to make the company, and Blake, a lot of money. And now Blake's picture, which he had been painting feverishly for the last three days, apparently would be a success.

But somehow, as he stared at his finished product, there was a queer little stab of apprehension mingling with his triumph. *What was this thing he had done?* Queer thought! Was it engendered by the fear and loathing which the fiendish figure on the canvas so obviously inspired in Elsa? Or was it something out of Blake's previous experiences—those queer little things which had seemed to happen to the other pictures he had painted when he was in art school? His mind swept back. . . .

From his comfortable armchair in a shadowed corner of the room, old Peter Jarrod—George's and Elsa's grandfather—spoke for the first time.

"What I want to know is just what you men think you're going to do with that damned thing?" he demanded.

"I'M going to publish it," the dandified little Norton responded promptly. "Put it out in full-color reproductions. Why, damn it, within a month it'll be one of the most popular of Norton's Novelties. At a dollar per, we'll sweep the country with it. Remember 'September Morn'? That had sex as its appeal. Other successes have had humour—ribald, dirty humour generally. This has horror. Sheer horror—I'll be damned if it hasn't. Horror that fascinates—stimulates you. Don't you see that there's an aliveness to it—"

The word echoed in Blake's mind. Aliveness. . . . He stared at his picture. That twisted face with its ghastly missing nose—had he really painted that look of gloating, murderous cunning as realistically as it now seemed? That look of panting triumph as the degenerate hurried to some squalid cellar where he would gloat over that bloody hand? . . .

"Oh dear God—" In the tense, stricken silence of the big shadowed living room, Elsa's low cry rang out. And all the men instantly knew what had caused it—a low insistent sound which might have been here for some time, growing a little louder so that now it was suddenly apparent. It was a horrible sound. For that stricken instant the five of them were transfixed. The thing was a faint, rhythmic thump. A little murmuring, double beat . . .

Thump-thump. . . . Thump-thump. . . . Thump-thump. . . . A hurried, excited little sound. . . . It was somewhere near, muffled oddly.

Lanky George Jarrod leaped to his feet. He was shaking pallid. "Good God," he gasped. "That damned thing's alive. Don't you hear its heart?"

Thump-thump. . . . Thump-thump. . . . Blake found himself dashing for the painting. Did he frighten that little heart so that for a second or two it raced faster? One's strained, tensed imagination might conjure anything. Blake only knew that as he faced the thing on the canvas which he had created, he was imagining that he could hear, not only its thumping heart, but a swift sucking of its breath. Its eyes—those little windows which his skill had painted, seemed gleaming at him with a fiendish malevolence.

"You're all damn fools," he heard the cracked senile voiced of Peter Jarrod saying. "It's nothing."

Nothing but imagination. The sounds—whatever they might have been—were gone. For a moment, Blake stood shud-

dering with the absurd feeling that he had created something more than a horrible figure on canvas.

"That thumping noise," Elsa was stammering. "What was it? Didn't you hear it, grandfather?"

"Yes. I thought I heard something," the old man agreed. "Some noise from outside maybe. Anyways, it's gone now." He grinned at them, his thin old face wrinkling evilly. "You fellows oughtn't to monkey with horror if you're so afraid of it."

"I tell you it's alive," George Jarrod said shakily. "Or it was—just for a minute there. I tell you—"

Blake threw the cloth over the canvas and shoved the easel back against the wall. Just a painted figure of a killer. What nonsense for them all suddenly to be afraid of it!

"We're all—a little excited," the dandified Norton said. He was white to the lips, but he tweaked his little waxed mustache and tried to smile. "You certainly did a grand job, Blake. We'll take it to my office in the morning. What—what do you think we ought to title the damn thing?"

"I had in mind, just—*The Killer,*" Blake murmured.

"Capital. That's what we'll call it. 'The Killer.' "

THE KILLER. . . . Surely it was a good commercial title. Young Jack Blake was still pondering it when, an hour later, he was alone in his bedroom in the big, old-fashioned three-story country mansion. He had not yet undressed; he sat on his bed. Why was it that somehow he felt so queerly tense—so expectant? Queer that he could not feel triumph at the promised success of his picture; but could only feel a sense of guilt. As though he had done something dastardly—brought something into being which had no right to exist. . . . The Killer. What was that thing which the stump of his mutilated arm was supporting? What plans for grim bloody deeds were hatching within that deformed flattened skull? Plans engendered by what Blake's artistic skill and his own too-vivid imagination had only suggested on the canvas. The Killer would know at what Blake unwittingly might have hinted! The Killer would be planning it now. . . .

Wild, crazy thoughts! Young Blake tried to shake them off, lugubriously grinning as he told himself that he was an idiot. The old house was heavy with silence. Almost an hour had passed since they all had retired to their respective rooms. There were no servants about at night. Just five people here—and the Killer. Would his heart be thumping now with triumph as down there in the living room he found himself alone, with nothing to keep him from what he might want to do?

"By God, I'm an idiot," Blake muttered to himself. Why in the devil couldn't he go to bed and forget all this nonsense! Why, in God's name, did he feel so tensely expectant? In the close humid bedroom he started to undress; then with his coat and collar off he thought better of it, dimmed his little oil lamp and threw himself into the reclining wicker chair beside his bed. Was a man a murderer who created a killer? By God, that was an assinine thought if there ever was one! What a fool he would be to go downstairs now and spoil all his chances for money and fame by ripping that damned thing to pieces!

But again his mind swept back. Queer, that little figure of a black kitten which he had painted in Art School. It had been an ugly, spitting little devil. Heaven knows his skill had been such, even then, that he had put it on the canvas so that it looked realistic enough, frozen by his pigments in the very act of leaping to claw at somebody's face. And that night,

going on, he had startled a black shape on a fence at his elbow—a thing that leaped at him and clawed his face and scurried away. The bleeding rip across his face made the attack real enough. Oh well, there were plenty of black alley cats roaming the city. . . .

But it had been queer. And there had been other little coincidences like it. . . . Blake's roaming thoughts drifted off into nothingness. Then he knew that he had been asleep, perhaps for a considerable time, and that something had awakened him. Some distant noise? He couldn't tell. But he sat up in his chair, startled. On the bureau he saw that his small oil lamp had almost burned out its kerosene; it was flickering. . . .

Thump-thump. . . . Thump-thump. . . . Thump-thump. . . .

God! There it was! Rhythmic, excited little heartbeat. With his own heart seeming to match it, he sat stiff, listening. It was dim, muffled, but completely obvious, somewhere off in the distances of the big silent house.

And then, before he had time to move, another sound became audible—the sound of footsteps. They were out here in the big corridor—growing louder—footsteps approaching his door.

BLAKE had no more than time to leap to his feet when he saw that his door was moving inward. And then there was a soft, hurried voice:

"Jack! Jack, dear—"

"Elsa—"

She came in. Slippers were on her bare feet; a negligée was over her nightdress; her black hair fell in braids forward over her shoulders—framing her pallid, frightened face. She was shuddering as she threw herself into his arms.

"Oh Jack, I was too frightened to stay in my room. You hear it? That—that thing, downstairs somewhere—"

Was it downstairs? She clung to him as they listened. Thump-thump . . . thump-thump. . . . It could have been downstairs, or up here in one of the big second floor halls. Or had it already gone into some bedroom up here?

"My God, it's moving," Blake muttered. "It isn't standing still—prowling up here somewhere."

He started through his bedroom door. . . . The Killer. Damned thing which he had created, and which had no right to be alive. . . .

"Jack, please. Oh, dear God, don't leave me here alone—"

She clung to him as he cautiously strode along the dim padded corridor. Ahead of them, the big front stairs went curving down. The hall continued on past them, dwindling into a dim blurry darkness.

"Jack! My God—there it is!" Elsa barely whispered it, with her clutch tightening upon him as they stood frozen. Far down at the other end of the corridor there was an upright blob. A little light seemed to catch on an outstretched hand. Thump-thump . . . thump-thump. . . . Nothing of it was audible save its excited, pounding heart.

"Well, by God—" Blake muttered. With the girl behind him, he dashed forward. The thing saw them and fled, around an angle of the corridor, into a distant wing of the rambling old house. Its heartbeat sounded faster, and fainter, in an instant fading away.

At the end of the corridor, where it had been just a moment before, Blake stood transfixed.

"Oh, Jack—"

It was a wail of horror from Elsa; his arm supported her against him or she might have fallen. Both of them stood gazing, number, shocked into stricken silence at the horror of the thing on the floor—the thing which the Killer so evidently had dropped when it fled.

It was a human hand. Ghastly thing.

Vaguely incredulous, Blake stooped and touched it, shuddered and cast it away. The flesh was still warm. It had been hacked off at the wrist, where tendons and gory, pulpy crimsoned flesh dripped blood.

Blake gritted his teeth, as clutching Elsa he drew her back. A little trail of blood in the hall led to a nearby door.

"Grandfather's room," Elsa gasped.

He tried to keep her behind him as he opened the door, burst into the room into which moonlight straggled from the window. The bed was wildly rumpled, the sheets ghastly with crimson where the dead thing lay partly on the bed, head and shoulders dangling down, almost to the floor.

"Don't look, Elsa. Keep away—"

But she numbly clung to him. It was old Peter Jarrod. The white nightgown which enveloped his thin old body was slashed, ribboned, wet with crimson from the slashed and stabbed flesh under it. The head dangled loose on a neck partly severed. One of the arms hung down. It terminated in a bloody stump; the hand had been hacked away.

Then a sudden sound outside the open doorway made Blake stiffen. He and Elsa were in the center of the room. Blake whirled.

The Killer! He stood out in the dim hall, just beyond the doorway! Murderous degenerate figure of the canvas . . . hunched, misshapen creature, with gargoyle face leering. . . .

IN THAT second, Blake tried to cast the girl behind him and tense himself for a leap. In the hall the leering monster was shambling forward. No—the ghastly thing was tottering. It took only a step or two. Blake saw that on its chest a knife-wound was spreading crimson. . . . Another tottering step, then its knees buckled and it fell to the bedroom floor, just inside the door.

The moonlight gleamed on it, where it lay twitching with a moan of agony. The stump of its mutilated left arm waved. But the papier mache cuff which was there to hide the uninjured hand had pulled awry. The gargoyle face was twisted with death agony, but from this close viewpoint the flesh colored tape across the mustache of its upper lip, and the tape that bound the nose down and flattened it, were apparent.

Ghastly masquerade. Trappings to make the dandified little Norton look like the painted killer of the canvas. He was not dead, but obviously dying. With every faint, gasping breath blood choked up into his throat and drooled out his mouth. His glazing eyes focussed on Blake and Elsa as silently with stricken horror they bent over him.

"I was doing this, just to terrify the household—to get publicity for our horror picture," he faintly gasped. "That would have made a big difference—the idea that maybe it was supernatural and could come alive. Look, here's its heart . . ."

His right hand, crimsoned with paint, fumbled into the pocket of his shabby black cloak, brought out a little gadget that gave a muffled thump when he squeezed it. He tried to do that, but his twitching fingers dropped it. He let it lie on the floor; he seemed to forget it.

"I didn't—want to hurt anybody—just wanted to frighten you all."

"Then why kill old Mr. Jarrod?" Blake muttered. "Or did you?"

"No—before God, I didn't. He knows that I once wanted to marry Elsa—Elsa will be rich now with her grandfather's money. He will say that I planned all this—that I would have killed you too, Blake—so I could marry Elsa. All he has to do is admit that he killed me, when he caught me masquerading like this."

The blood in his throat momentarily choked him, but he coughed it out and

struggled on. "I see now what he was planning, when he suggested I work this scheme to get publicity for the picture. With me—dead, he can shift the embezzlement at the office onto me. But I found out about that—his embezzlement—by God, I could've sent him to jail. With Elsa rich now, he knows he can get the money from her to buy his junior partnership in the company. And I guess—juggle my interest, to defraud my sister. She's just an inexperienced woman. And this — murderous publicity now — front page stories to make that horror picture of yours famous, and roll in the money for Norton's Novelties—"

"He did the killing? Who do you mean?" Blake muttered.

The dying man was coughing blood. But Blake needed no answer. It was obvious now.

"Elsa, you stay here—keep back," Blake swiftly murmured. "By God, this damned murderous scoundrel—I'll get him—"

He hardly stopped to think that he had no weapon. With clenched fists he strode for the door; and then he stopped, again transfixed. From down the hall, a voice was calling:

"Jack—Jack Blake! . . . Elsa! Elsa—Jack, wake up! By God, I've got him! I've killed him!"

IT WAS young George Jarrod, calling, excited, horrified, urgent. From the doorway Blake saw him, in his pajamas, with a crimsoned knife in his hand. He was running toward the distant bedrooms of Elsa and Blake.

"Here I am," Blake called.

Jarrod stopped, far off down there in the distant dim corridor. And then he came running.

"You, Jack?" he shouted. "Why—why, my God, I thought you were asleep. He—he killed grandfather. And I caught him—killed him here by the top of the stairs." And then, when he reached the stairs-top, he stood startled. "Why, my God—his body isn't here! I was sure I killed him—why what—"

"Come in here," Blake called. With a gesture of warning to Elsa, he stepped back into the shambles of the bedroom, and braced himself for a spring upon young Jarrod as he came through the doorway. He could hear him approaching now. . . But down on the floor the dying Norton had hitched over the threshold into the hall. He saw the oncoming Jarrod.

And he gasped, "There—there he is—he—stabbed me—"

Young Jarrod, ten feet away, abruptly halted. He could see partly into the bedroom now—saw Elsa, and saw Blake crouched. Full realization struck him so that he snarled:

"All right, damn you—then you'll get it too—" His knife slashed at Blake as he leaped. But Blake knocked it up with a blob of his fist. The knife clattered away as their bodies collided. They were on the hall floor as they rolled, with kicking legs and flailing lunging fists. Blake was the heavier. But Jarrod was agile. For a moment when he was on top, he lunged, broke away, scrambled to his feet and fled down the hall.

Blake was up in another second or two. The knife was lying on the floor; he snatched it up, and ran. Down the corridor he could see Jarrod disappearing into his own bedroom. Blake was there in another second, with his knife upraised. In the partly moonlit room he could see Jarrod frantically fumbling in his bureau drawer, evidently for another weapon. He did not get it. He saw the oncoming Blake, and with an oath of terror he fled for the bedroom's opened French windows. They led to a little balcony, which ran the length of this little side wing.

The balcony was black with shadows, but twenty feet or so down its length,

Blake, cautiously from the windows, thought he could make out Jarrod's crouching, panting figure.

And suddenly Jarrod was squealing, "Oh my God—let me alone!" He was up erect now, backed against the low balcony rail. Wild terror was in his voice: "Let me alone—Oh my God—you damnable monster!"

In the doorway, Blake stood transfixed. Was Jarrod struggling with something? Or had his own terror brought a frenzy of madness upon him as he saw that Blake had him trapped? . . . Thump-thump. . . . Was that the beating of Blake's own heart, which he could feel now as it seemed to knock against his ribs?

"Oh my God—". . . Jarrod wildly screamed as Blake saw him topple backward over the rail. For a second he hung, and then he went down. Heavy electric wires stretched just below the balcony. Jarrod screamed again as his body hit them, turned, went through them. There was a thud as it struck the white paved walk on the ground beside the house. It writhed for only a moment, and then it was motionless.

"He evidently died within a minute after he hit the pavement," the physician said. "His neck is broken."

A GROUP of them were gathered in the living room, where young Jarrod's broken body lay on the couch: Blake and Elsa, the physician and three or four policemen.

The dawn was fast approaching. Its flat grey light struck upon Jarrod's face. It was ghastly with blood—and noisome where one of the wires as the body fell through them had slashed through what perhaps had been the cartilage of its nose, so that there was only the nostril holes in a bloody welter. The body itself was a crushed, boneless thing.

Across the room, one of the policemen had removed the shroud from Blake's picture. "So this is what you was tellin' us about?" the policeman muttered.

The dawnlight struck on it—weird, murderous, shambling figure, seeming furtively to be ready to hurry forward off the canvas. Grisly, fiendish shape, carrying the gory hand he had hacked from some victim; and the stump of his mutilated arm holding some prize lovingly against his chest.

And abruptly the policeman murmured: "I get it. He hacked off a hand, because he needed a hand for that stump he's got. My Gawd, he seems to need a nose too. What's that he's holdin' against his chest? Oh, I see. He's hacked off somebody's nose. By God, that's sure a gruesome picture, Mr. Blake."

Blake tensed and confronted the canvas. Was it only a trick of the dawnlight now, making that shadowy little thing he had painted there look like a hacked off human nose? By a trick of lighting, or coincidence, certainly it looked enough like that so the policeman had recognized it. . . . The Killer, who had gotten what he wanted. . . .

The commercial reproductions of The Killer have made quite a success. Perhaps you have bought one. There is no need for you to be afraid of it. Assuredly it can't harm you. That would be idiotic. Young Blake and Elsa have the original in their home. It sometimes makes them shudder, but they know of course that by all the laws of reason it cannot be anything but canvas and oil pigments. But Jack Blake is not painting any other pictures like it. That's just his own personal superstition. He feels that the next one might not be so beneficent to him.

CARAVAN of INCREDIBLE CRIMES

No 11 Murder in the Mail

By CHARLES BOSWELL

America's two greatest mass murderers. . . .

NOWHERE else in the world could these things have happened. It required the complete democracy of the United States to have produced situations so entirely horrible as existed in LaPorte, Indiana, in 1908; and in Clarksburg, West Virginia, as late as 1931. For in a democracy people are much less suspicious, much more trusting and believing. Of course belief, carried to an extreme, becomes gullibility, and gullibility can be very dangerous. To say that the victims of the mass-murdering inclinations of Belle Guinness and Harry Powers were extremely gullible, would not be an exaggeration.

In defense of the land of our fathers, the observation may be made that neither Guinness nor Powers were actual, native-born Americans. Powers, indeed, was not really Powers, but merely assumed the alias for convenience. He was born in Holland as Herman Drenth and emigrated to our shores in 1910. On the other hand, the maiden name of Belle Guinness has been lost to history. The little known of her early life is that she came from Norway, arriving here as a young girl in the late 1870s.

Even so, the immigrant antecedents of our foremost love killers hardly spares us the doubtful honor of pedestalling them as uniquely American. Certainly the conditions under which they were allowed to operate so sinisterly are as native to us as the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. Where else but in a city like Detroit would there have been an American Friendship Society? Where but in Minneapolis a Norwegian-American Matrimonial Bureau? For it was through these devices of postal passion and mail-order mating that Harry Powers and Belle Guinness were able to perpetrate their ghastly crimes.

Twenty-three years separated them. But time was all, time and sex. In other respects the West Virginia monster and the Indiana murder-farm proprietress were as alike as the killings they committed. Both had the same motive—money. Both chose the same victims—prospective mates. The *modus operandi* of one was the *modus operandi* of the other. Holding out baits of sexual and physical attraction which did not exist, offering participation in wealth which was but the figment of their heinous imaginations, they lured their victims by means of extravagant advertisements placed with matrimonial agencies, and correspondence clubs.

Contemporary newspapers describe Belle Guinness thusly:

"She was 48, fat, and heavy-featured. Atop ponderous shoulders sat a head of tremendous size, the scalp covered by an insufficient quantity of mud-colored hair. Her eyes were small, beady, and set too close together. Her hands and arms were huge, capable of wielding a sledge hammer. Beneath her gross body were stuck grotesquely small feet. She seemed to balance with difficulty as she walked, swaying from side to side wildly, drunkenly."

On a similar hand, Powers answered to this word picture painted of him by a West Virginia reporter:

"He is 5′ 7″ tall and weighs well over 200 pounds. Most of his weight is in body and head; his legs are extremely short, and even among ducks he would be called duck-legged. His eyes are greenish-grey, green predominating. They are like a pig's except that they aren't separated by a snout. The corner of one seems to adjoin the corner of the other. His arms are too short, his extremities too small. He waddles when he walks and one wonders but that the next moment he will keel over at too great an angle and never be able to right himself . . ."

Twins except for time! Despite their striking resemblances, the love monster and monstress never so much as knew one another. For two years prior to Powers' entrance into the United States, Guinness was gone . . .

DESPITE later descriptions of her, in 1883 Belle Guinness was 23 years old and comely. She worked as a servant girl in Chicago and was far from satisfied with the lack of appreciation in her employers and the continued prospect of a life of drudgery. The alternative, of course, was marriage but the young Scandinavian girl did not number among her rather limited acquaintances a male to whom she was sufficiently attracted for so serious a step.

Romantic minded, she was a devotee of the "Are You Lonely?" columns of a local weekly paper. One advertisement in particular appealed to her. "Carpenter," it ran. "Age 30. Considered handsome. Hard worker. Intentions honorable. Correspondence invited and treated confidentially. Reply Box P-347."

Belle Guinness answered, precipitating a voluminous interchange of letters which eventually culminated in a meeting. The man who'd placed the ad was Max Sorenson, Norwegian like herself, no Adonis in appearance but big and brawny and good-humored and the sort who would undoubtedly prove to be a good provider. Before the year was out, Belle became Mrs. Sorenson and the mistress of a neat little cottage in Venice, a suburb on the shores of Lake Michigan.

For seven years the woman lived with her husband and then he trustingly insured his own life for $8,500, naming her as sole beneficiary. The day it was delivered Belle stared with amazement at the face of the policy, her thoughts racing with problems in arithmetic. Max earned $2,000 a year. From the looks of things, he would never make much more. Out of this income, scrimping and cutting corners, they were able to save between $400 and $500 per annum but that was all. To accumulate as much as the insurance company would pay in the event of Max's death, even figuring in savings bank interest compounded semi-annually, fifteen long, dreary years must pass . . .

It happened in 1890. One hot summer evening the carpenter came home after a tough day nailing down the roof sheathing of an apartment house. Keeping up the gay pretense of being a good wife, Belle had a comfortable chair placed for him out in the back yard, and several bottles of beer waiting on ice. Max sat down, fanning himself with his hat. Belle ran for the beer, on the way picking up an already-prepared glass in which were a few drops of a liquid of more sinister consistency than malt brew.

With one gulp Max emptied the glass. Suddenly his movements seemed to freeze. He tried to say something but the only sound that emerged from his lips was a gasp, then a gurgle. His eyes had been closed in pleasured anticipation of the cooling beer. Now the lids snapped open. The eyeballs remained transfixed, staring dully ahead. As though the motion was involuntary, his body reared once from the chair and then slumped back. The glass slipped from his hand. The point of his chin fell to his chest and his wife, Belle, now laughing in high glee, knew that he was dead.

"IT WAS the heat," a friendly doctor said. "He came in overheated and took a big swig of an ice cold drink. It affected his heart and he dropped dead."

Max Sorenson wasn't buried. According to what his wife claimed were his "express wishes," he was cremated. After that she notified the insurance company. Their demands for an autopsy were, to say the least, futile. Eventually they paid out the full $8,500 and the murderous Belle looked around for new worlds to conquer.

In 1892 she married Joseph Guinness by whose name she was destined to be infamously known throughout the centuries. He was a prosperous real estate dealer and because of his money she gave herself to him with reckless abandon. Belle was the type of woman whose responses varied with the family income. When things were going bad financially she sulked and pouted and slept in the guest room. But when quick, profitable deals were breaking, she showed her appreciation by becoming intensely amorous and considerate of her husband's needs.

By Guinness she had three children, two girls and a boy. In 1902 Guinness

conceived the colossal idea of creating a Chicago suburb across the Illinois line in LaParte, Indiana. He had inside information, he believed, that the Illinois Central was going to construct and operate a commuter's railroad in that direction. He spent his fortune buying up farm land options, employing engineers to subdivide and lay out potential streets, and advertising his "Indiana Homelands" for sale.

The railroad did not build. Guinness' money was wasted. With his remaining asset only a small farm which he had himself purchased outside of LaPorte, the real estate dreamer awoke to find himself on the verge of bankruptcy. His life was insured for $10,000, wife beneficiary. In an effort to raise money he decided to cash in what value there was in the policy and start all over again.

Strangely enough, Belle was encouraging. She promised him all the help she could muster, avowing to cut household expenses to a minimum. One morning in December, 1902, after the children were hurried off to school, Joseph Guinness got the insurance policy out of the family strong box, bundled himself up and made ready for a trip to Chicago for the completion of the contemplated transaction.

With a lingering goodbye, good luck kiss, Belle saw him to the door and then hurried quickly upstairs. When her husband emerged onto a strip of front yard pavement, Belle quietly raised a window. A cast iron meat grinding device hurtled down. Belle's aim was accurate. Clipped at the base of the skull, Joseph Guinness fell never to rise again. A belatedly called doctor pronounced him dead as soon as he examined him.

"How did it happen?" the doctor asked.

"He slipped on the ice, poor lamb," the widow replied, weeping copiously and dramatically. "I was upstairs and I opened the window to ask him to get home early. He turned quickly. He lost his balance. The back of his head struck the corner of that concrete doorstep . . ."

This time Belle Guinness collected with more difficulty, but she did collect even though she had to threaten suit before she got the money. By now the insurance underwriters were convinced that she had murdered two men but it was beyond their abilities to prove it. The experience of being closely questioned and seriously suspected frightened Belle, however, and she resolved to have nothing further to do with insurance.

It has been said that with the passing of the years guilt in the heart of a person writes itself on the countenance. With Belle this indelible scribbling did not stop at her face but extended itself remarkably, encompassing her whole body. Within a brief while the murderess changed from a blooming woman to a bloated hag. Inasmuch as appearance plays such a large part in the regard with which a person is held, everyone within miles of LaPorte soon became afraid of her. Though realizing something weird and mysterious was being enacted on the Guinness farm, the townspeople, even the local police authorities, left its repellent proprietress strictly alone.

THE taste Belle had had of murder gave her appetite for more. To top this her funds were expended and it was necessary that she make another haul. She must marry again, she realized, but she was also cognizant of the fact that now her looks were against her and it would be better that a prospective suitor bargained for her "pig in a poke" fashion.

Recalling the manner in which she'd met Max Sorenson, her first husband, she now purchased a membership in the Norwegian-American Matrimonial Bureau of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and began placing advertisements in the lovelorn columns of the *Scandinavian,* a newspaper circulated among certain of the foreign-born elements of the Lake States. With

rather extravagant assessments of her person and her possessions, she described herself thusly:

WIDOW. Age 30. Brunette, good disposition, and a good sport. Fond of parties social and otherwise. Has own 75 acre farm, orchard of young apple, pear, and peach trees. Land adjoins a boulevard. 12 room house practically new and with all modern conveniences. Estimated worth—$50,000.

Needless to say, Belle Guinness' mail thenceforth increased. She picked and chose among the letters with care, attempting to continue correspondence only with those who were financially worthy of her attention. In subsequent interchanges she also tried to learn as to whether or not the person to whom she was writing had any dependents or other relatives who might grow annoyingly curious as to what had happened to him.

His desirability for her purposes established, Belle then invited her correspondent to LaPorte. With each invitation she insisted that the recipient, as proof of his seriousness and honest intentions, should bring with him all the cash and securities available to him. Not that she needed money, she reminded, but before giving her hand she wanted to be sure that her chosen spouse was a person of sufficient substance to appreciate her.

It is amazing that adults of enough intelligence to amass a small estate should fall for such a gag. But they did, not singly, not in couples, but by the half dozen. In preparation for their coming, Belle dug a pit at the back of her barn, leaving the excavated dirt piled handily by.

In July, 1905, George Berry, of Tusca, Illinois, arrived in La Porte dressed in his Sunday best and with $1,500 cash—his life's savings—bulging in his pockets.

Belle met him at the station. Taking one look at her face, Berry started to get back onto the train, but Belle assured him that she wasn't the Widow Guinness.

"Oh, no," Belle announced with a deprecating smile. "I'm only her maid. Why, she—she's beautiful!"

So encouraged, Berry drove with Belle out to the farm. It was at night and the children were in bed. Further, the darkness concealed the appearance of the farm and the meager size of the house and this camouflage abetted Belle's plans.

Arriving, Belle ushered George Berry into a dimly lit hallway, telling him she'd go upstairs and announce his coming to Mrs. Guinness. She went up the front steps and a second later came down the back ones. Snatching up a hatchet as she passed the back yard wood block, she circled the house, entering again and walking on awkward tiptoe to the fireplace where Berry was standing with his back turned. As George Berry waited in vain for the beautiful Belle Guinness to descend the stairs, ugly, frenzied, maniacal Belle Guinness crept up behind him and split open his head.

The man from Illinois was the first of a long line of prospective husbands to die on the LaPorte farm. In June of 1906 there followed Charles Neiburg of Philadelphia, contributing $500 to Belle's nefarious cause. In October of that same year she killed Wakefield Berry (no relation to George) who came from Monterey, Pennsylvania, and in December, John Moe of Elbow Lake, Minnesota, who brought with him the tidy sum of $1,100.

In 1907 the Indiana monster committed two murders—E. J. Thielson of Minneapolis in June and Ole C. Budsberg of Iola, Wisconsin, in August. Budsberg brought with him $1,000 in cash and a $1,000 certified check drawn on the Farmers Bank of Iola.

In early April, 1908, Andrew Helglean of Aberdeen, South Dakota, completed correspondence with Mrs. Guinness and set out to marry her. He took $3,000 cash

with him, despite the fact his brother warned him against the move. Belle Guinness didn't know about the brother. Belle murdered the man from Dakota just as she'd murdered the others. But there is always a last time. Andrew Helglean was the last fly the spider of LaPorte was ever to attract to her web. . . .

THE seat of Harry Powers' operations was likewise a farm, but one constructed especially for the purpose of killing. Though Powers lived in Clarksburg, West Virginia, his "business," so to speak, was located a few miles outside the town near a hamlet called Quiet Dell. Here Powers owned a building of sheet iron exterior which had formerly been a garage. Beneath the heavy flooring of this he dug a windowless sound-proof cellar which was entered from above by means of a trap door.

Emigrating from Holland, Powers first settled in Iowa, farming with his father near the town of Fairbanks. He later went to Waupun, Wisconsin, and in 1921-22 served a sentence of 18 months in the Wisconsin state penitentiary for burglary. In 1924, under the name of Joseph Gildow, he worked in a garage in Miller, South Dakota, but later that same year moved to Mansfield, Ohio, and operated a garage business of his own.

Here in 1925, he was arrested under the name of Joseph Gildeau for defrauding a Miss Lena Fellows out of $5,400. But the case wasn't prosecuted. Miss Fellows agreed to drop the complaint if Powers would return the money.

Some time later Powers moved to Clarksburg, marrying Miss Luella Strother whom he had met by mail, both being correspondents of the American Friendship Society of Detroit. Mrs. Powers, together with her sister and her mother, conducted a small dry goods store, living in a house which they owned a few doors down the street. Moving in with them, Powers made no pretense of legitimate work. When in Clarksburg he simply loafed about the house. A large part of the time he was away from town, traveling around the country calling on and defrauding women.

The marriage with Luella Strother took place in 1927. Between this time and the summer of 1931 Powers carried on voluminous correspondence with women all over the eastern half of the United States. He operated under several names, principally that of Cornelius O. Pierson and D. P. Lowther. To each woman that he wrote he promised marriage. Each that he visited he left considerably poorer for having entertained him.

It was in this fashion that he described himself in the friendship society's advertisements:

CIVIL ENGINEER—College education. Worth $150,000 or more with an income ranging between $400 and $3,000 per month. My business enterprises prevent me from making social contacts and I am unable, therefore, to make the acquaintance of the right kind of women. Am an Elk and a Mason, own a beautiful ten room house, completely furnished. My wife would have her own car and plenty of spending money. My wealth is made up principally of oil and coal properties, also rich gold and silver deposits. Address Cornelius O. Pierson, P. O. Box No. 277, Clarksburg, W. Va.

Among the women who fell for this was Mrs. Asta Buick Eicher of Park Ridge, Illinois. Mrs. Eicher was a widow. Her husband, Henry, a Swiss silversmith, died in 1927 leaving her with three small children. Mrs. Eicher owned her home and had a small cash and insurance estate but she was badly in need of a husband to help with the raising of her fatherless family.

Powers visited her and made love to her throughout the early spring of 1931 but he wasn't able to trick her out of her small fortune. Mrs. Eicher held out for

marriage and finally Powers was forced to consent to this.

"Mortgage your house" Powers advised. "Then later I will place it in the hands of a real estate agent for either sale or rent. You'll never need the place again. In my home I have room enough for you and all of your children. We'll go on our honeymoon alone and then we'll come back after the children."

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Eicher foolishly consented.

Plans were made and a date set—July 25, 1931. Just as Powers suggested, Mrs. Eicher got the mortgage money in cash, also withdrew in full all that she had in a savings account. Powers arrived in a new Chevrolet car. The children were placed under the supervision of a friendly neighbor. Powers and Mrs. Eicher went off.

ALL that day and late into the night they drove through Illinois and Ohio. Mrs. Eicher continually questioned when and where the ceremony was to take place, Powers kept putting her off, assuring her that all arrangements had been made and as soon as they reached West Virginia, they would be married.

They passed through Clarksburg without stopping. By this time Mrs. Eicher had fallen asleep and when finally they reached Quiet Dell and drew up in front of the sheet iron garage, Mrs. Eicher didn't know where she was.

"This the preacher's?" she questioned, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

"Yes, darling," Powers replied. Tenderly he helped her from the car and through the dark doorway of the garage. Once he had her inside, his manner changed abruptly. He slammed the door and picked up a cudgel of wood. Before Mrs. Eicher had opportunity to know what was happening to her, she was felled like an ox in an abattoir and she sank dead to the floor.

Now the inherent selfishness of the monster came to the fore. Not satisfied with the roll of cash he found in Mrs. Eicher's pocketbook, Powers decided to return to her Park Ridge home and rifle her personal possessions. Two days later he did this, first taking the woman's body into the garage cellar and locking it in one of the already prepared rooms.

However, the neighbor who had custody of the Eicher children caught sight of him and rushed over to congratulate him on his marriage.

"Thanks," Powers replied, disgruntled. "Yes, my bride likes her Fairmount home fine. She's remaining there while I come back here after the children and some of her things. You better get them ready..."

There were two little girls and a boy. While they were being dressed and their bags were being packed, Powers carried all the silver out of the house, all the linen, all the kitchen utensils and two Oriental rugs. These he packed in his car, later placing the children on top of the luggage. But there was something he left in the house, something which was to eventually doom him, although, at the moment, that possibility was the furtherest from his mind . . .

What to do with the children? Pondering grimly over this, he rushed them out of Park Ridge and the state of Illinois, across Ohio, and into West Virginia. The two little girls and the little boy had high hopes for the future; they enjoyed the ride; but they were tremendously disappointed when Powers' car stopped before the lonely garage building in Quiet Dell, West Virginia.

"We're not going to live here?" they questioned, hopeful of a negative answer.

"Oh, no," Powers assured them. "I just want to stop by for a moment to show an old friend what a fine family I've acquired."

The children trooped into the forbidding building, trustfully following Powers

into the basement. Acting quickly, the monster segregated them, thrusting one into one airless cell and the others into the two remaining. Heavy bars were dropped across the doors. With the pitiful cries of the children ringing in his ears, Powers left them without food, without water. The monster was in a hurry. He had other business to attend.

ON JULY 29, 1931, Powers arrived in Northboro, Massachusetts, to keep a date with Mrs. Dorothy Pressler Lemke. By mail they had arranged to be married and Powers was already 24 hours late for his wedding day. But the nuptials did not take place in Northboro, this despite the fact that the widow, Mrs. Lemke, wanted to be married at the home of her sister, Mrs. Fleming.

"But you haven't gotten your trousseau yet," Powers persuaded his blushing bride to be. "Before we get married I wanted to take you to New York and buy you some clothes fitting the occasion."

Mrs. Lemke had $4,200 in a Worcester, Massachusetts, saving bank. She did not withdraw the money but she was stupid enough to give Powers a signed draft authorizing him to make the withdrawal.

The route which they followed on leaving Northboro was a strange one for reaching New York—down through Pennsylvania and across into West Virginia. Fortunately for Powers' purposes Mrs. Lemke had a very limited knowledge of geography and she was only moderately surprised when her "affiance's" Chevrolet halted before a strange-looking sheet iron building outside of Quiet Dell.

"What's this?" Mrs. Lemke wanted to know.

"A garage," Powers told her. "I think there's something wrong with the motor."

Powers entered the building, returned in a few moments. "Can't find anyone around," he announced. "But, say, there's one of the most interesting things inside . . . You ought to come and look."

"What is it?"

"You just come and look!"

Her woman's curiosity pricked, Mrs. Lemke clambered from the car, joining Powers within. "I can't see, it's dark," she said.

"In the cellar," Powers indicated. "There's a light there."

Mrs. Lemke started down. No sooner had she descended no more than a half dozen steps than Powers sprang to action. Over the cellar opening there was a rope dangling from a beam and it had a noose on its lower end. Powers slipped this over Mrs. Lemke's head and jerked her off her feet. She started to cry out but the tightening rope cut off her screams. Even as she died, Powers was already below her hauling out, one at a time, his three weakened, thirsting and starving child captives.

These, too, he hanged. Then with five dead bodies on his hands, he waited for nightfall and then dug out a trench back of the building. By working until early morning he had all five buried and then he drove to Uniontown, Pennsylvania, where he presented Mrs. Lemke's check to a bank for cashing. But they wouldn't honor it, not immediately. Powers had to wait in Uniontown until August 10, giving the check time to clear, before he received the fruits of his ghastly crime.

While there Powers amused himself writing letters to Mrs. Lemke's sister, forging Mrs. Lemke's name. Samples from several of the letters follow:

Hello Everybody—

I am feeling fine physically but am very disappointed in my marriage plans. We have completely broken up. We had a disagreement and it made him very mad so I put a note in the car while he was not there and I simply walked away. I have the name and address of a lady

wishing to find a reliable companion and maybe I will go to work for her.

Love from

Dorothy

Two days later Mrs. Fleming received this:

Hello all—

I reached the lady and I will accept the position as companion. This lady seems nice and she will go on a long trip, perhaps Europe and the far East. She has a daughter who will go so I guess I will be kept very busy.

Love to all from

Dorothy

And still later this:

Here I am again. I thought I would tell you that we will go on our trip day after tomorrow. We will be gone ten months and we are going through Europe and China and Japan and other places.

I am glad now that I did not get married as I would have missed all this. I don't think I'll ever marry now. Please do not tell anyone of the disastrous outcome of my marriage plans.

Do not worry if you do not hear from me for a long time. Will now close with best wishes and love to all of you.

Dorothy

IT IS truly incredible how closely the ruses to which Harry Powers resorted resemble those of Belle Guinness, Belle the LaPorte, Indiana, murderess of 23 years before. In April, 1908, Belle's last victim was Andrew Helglean and Andrew, unknown to Belle, had a brother named Asle.

Though counselled against the marriage venture by his brother, Andrew left their South Dakota home and headed for LaPorte. After waiting for two weeks and not hearing from Andrew, Asle wrote to Mrs. Guinness.

The message terrified Belle. "He's going to investigate!" she exclaimed to herself and for a while she was terribly confused. But later, considering the matter with a cooler head, she figured that her best course was to let him investigate in person—and so she sat down and replied as follows:

Dear good brother of the best friend I ever had in this world!

It is with tears flooding in my eyes and my heart overburdened with grief that I write you about your own dear brother. He is gone from me, and I know not where. As I think of him my heart bleeds. May God bless him wherever he may be.

Sell off everything that he owns. Get together as much of your own money as you can and come here during the first part of May. We will then go and seek him. Bring the money all in cash. It will be easier to handle in that way. If we can find Andrew I will fly to his arms and never, oh, never be separated from him again. Do not neglect to bring the money in cash.

This letter was dated April 23, 1908. Asle Helglean read it for what it was—an effort to delude him as to what had actually happened to Andrew and a further effort to get him to walk into Belle's trap with all the wealth he possessed. Andrew did not wait until the first of May. He immediately wired the sheriff of LaPorte county, placing all available facts in his hands, and that worthy, backed by several deputies, went out to investigate.

Belle pleaded for time. She swore to the sheriff that she'd just heard from Andrew and if the sheriff would come back the next day she would produce the missing man. Torn between belief and unbelief, the sheriff went away, promising to return the following morning.

But he came back sooner than he expected because that night the Guinness farmhouse burned. No one saw Belle or any of her three children flee the flames. Alive, no one has ever seen any of them since. In the ashes of the house were found three small bodies and one large female body. So charred were all of them that positive identification could not be established. Did Belle kill her children,

set fire to the house, and then commit suicide or did Belle flee the town with her family and substitute other bodies? . . . The question has never been answered.

But some bodies were identified—those back of Belle's barn. In a great hole filled over with rubbish there were seven dead men and the first to be disinterred was the freshly killed Andrew Helglean. . . .

LESS than a month after despatching Mrs. Eicher and her family and Mrs. Lemke, less than three weeks after drawing the $4,000 from the Uniontown bank, Harry Powers girded his loins for further victims.

On August 26, 1931, he wrote two letters, one to Mrs. Bessie Storrs of Olean, N. Y., and the other to Miss Virginia Bell of Hagerstown, Maryland:

Bessie Dear:

I am compelled to remain here until Saturday evening. Will you be patient until that time, dear?

I got your letter, honey. It was so sweet and it makes me more than glad. Honey—I certainly shall be happy when I can hold you close and when we can begin life together.

I love thee.

XXXX

And:

My Sweet Darling:

This weather has delayed me some. Will you be patient until Sunday?

I will wire you when I leave—so you will know.

Well, honey girl—you can wait for my wire and look for me real soon.

Ever Yours,

Connie

But the two letters were never mailed. They were found in Harry Powers' (alias Cornelius Pierson's) pocket when he was arrested in the late afternoon of that same day. A neighbor in Park Ridge, Illinois, not having heard from Mrs. Asta Eicher, had grown suspicious. The police were informed. Chief Johnson searched the Eicher house and found a huge bundle of letters bearing the return address of P. O. Box 277, Clarksburg.

Leery of all and sundry correspondence clubs and romances developing from them, Chief Johnson thought it best to check with the Clarksburg authorities as to the identity of Pierson and the welfare of Mrs. Eicher. Detective Carl Southern of the Clarksburg police found that the post office box in question was in the name of Cornelius Pierson, well enough, but that the address Pierson gave the postal authorities was the home of Harry Powers.

And Powers answered Pierson's description.

Questioned, Powers admitted to his dual identity, saying he used correspondence clubs "just for fun." Questioned about Mrs. Eicher, he became evasive, told conflicting stories, tripped himself up.

Powers was investigated. The garage in Quiet Dell was disclosed. An odor of rotting human flesh permeated the place and so the officers began digging. Five bodies were found. Powers was tried, convicted, and in March of 1932 hanged in the yard of the West Virginia state penitentiary at Moundsville.

So ends a truly American saga. In and above whatever regret might be held for either Powers or Guinness ever having lived, there remains the misfortune that they were not contemporaries. Suppose Belle Guinness had flourished in 1931 rather than 1908? Suppose, at both one and the same time, Belle and Harry had been members of the American Friendship Society? . . . Who, if either, would have survived if Harry Powers had journeyed from Clarksburg to call on Belle Guinness in LaPorte?

PERFUME OF DARK DESIRE

By RAY KING

A starkly terrifying novel of a bestial passion which lies dormant in each of us!

CHAPTER ONE

White Flesh—and Perfume

THE GIRL at the drug counter said softly, "I want a bottle of 'Excitement,' please."

It was not only the words, but the way she said them—hurriedly, tremulously—that startled John Holden. From his seat

Could there be such a thing as a monster who dwelt in eternal smoke and whose call no young girl dared disobey? It seemed too fantastic—but John Holden had to watch in helpless silence as Babs James went willingly to the arms of the hell-born creature from whose embrace death was the only release . . .

at the soda counter in the dim little country drug store, he glanced up from his newspaper. And the girl herself was startling. She was arrestingly beautiful; tall, slim, dark-haired. Her filmy, flowered crepe dress was quite in keeping with this late summer afternoon in the quiet village, but despite its simplicity, or perhaps because of it, it could not conceal the rich, vibrant curves of her beautiful form.

Was her whole voluptuous body tremulous, like that tremulous quiver in her voice as she spoke to the druggist? Young John Holden had that vague impression. He sat staring, tense. The drug clerk was a pale, slack-jawed fellow, perhaps in his late twenties, with sleek, blond hair that had grey streaks at the temples.

"Yes, all right, Miss—James," he murmured. There was a display of perfumes in ornate bottles on the counter, but he

did not touch them. Instead he shot the girl a queer look and leaned toward her. "You damned little fool to talk so—"

His voice dropped so that the speech was lost to Holden.

"Oh—yes, I'm sorry," she murmured, abashed. She cast a swift glance around the store to see if she had been overheard.

What weird mystery was this? As the drug clerk turned away, the young girl stood as though tense, panting inwardly —her whole aspect suggesting the furtive buyer of illicit goods.

Then Holden saw that the clerk was wrapping something. With a smirking smile, he handed it to her and received a crisp bill in payment. Were his pale eyes still warning her? Holden thought so. And then the girl turned and went from the store.

For a long time Holden sat with his heart accelerated at the thoughts which the girl's desirable young body had awakened in him. He had not realized he was so susceptible. It seemed strange to him that John Holden, young New York lawyer, who had lived all his life in the gay metropolis, should come up here to this quiet little country village and be stirred by a girl buying perfumery in a drug store! He smiled at the idea. She had bought a bottle of perfume called "Excitement." Was all the rest of it his own too-vivid imagination? He tried to tell himself so. Presently he left the store carrying his suitcase; he had almost dismissed the incident.

John Holden was twenty-seven. He was junior partner in the law firm his father had established a generation ago. His father had been dead a year. Then a letter had come from one Robert Martin, who was here in the up-state village of Rocky Hollow—an old friend and client of his father's who now had a piece of legal business to transact.

So Holden had taken the train to Rocky Hollow. Martin, he had learned, lived just about a mile out in the hills, and Holden decided now to walk out there. The village—only a flag-stop on the little branch railway—was somnolent, drowsing in the slanting rays of the setting sun. There was little farming country here—just stony hills that led up into a distant line of mountains, purpling in the gathering darkness. There was a queer haze, as though a pall of smoke were hanging low to the ground.

At the edge of the tiny village Holden halted in doubt where two unmarked foot-trails forked. A squalid cabin stood behind an even more decrepit fence. A white-bearded old man sat drowsing on the broken steps of the porch. Holden hailed him, asked for directions.

"EH? Rob Martin—you goin' up to Rob Martin's?"

"Yes," Holden said.

The old man came hobbling down to the fence. "It's up that ways." He gestured, his rheumy old eyes roving Holden's figure. And then his gaze swept out over the distant stony uplands. "Mighty sight of smoke out there tonight," he mumbled. "Yes sir—mighty sight of smoke—wouldn't want to be goin' up into them hills on foot after sundown. Not me."

A daft, senile old fellow, thought Holden. "Well, thanks a lot," he said.

Then the old man reached over the fence and clutched his arm. "Are you a real stranger up here in these parts?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, you go easy, roamin' around when night comes. It ain't been after nothin' but girls, so far. But you never can tell—"

His mumbling voice trailed off. "*What's* after nothing but girls?" Holden demanded.

"The thing in the smoke. Don't ask me what it is, young feller. Human or demon —I don't know. But it lives in the smoke.

An' the smoke excites it—makes it want girls. I can imagine how that is. Why, when I was a young feller—anything that had a certain smell, I can remember—"

"And what does this—monster do?" Despite himself, Holden felt his heart beating faster.

"Do? It grabs a girl an' carries her away. An' then when you find her, lyin' out in the uplands somewhere, it's torn her clothes off—an' then it's strangled her. There's been three this week since the smoke began—" The old man's cracked voice rose with his excitement. "They can't catch the monster. There was a big posse out last night, but they couldn't catch it. An' people are gettin' pretty scared, cause there's lots o' young girls around here actin' queer. Not just frightened, but actin' queer. You know why that is?"

"Why?" Holden murmured.

"Well, I got my own theory. That monster has some way of lurin' the girls out into the smoke. They want to go. See what I mean? They're frightened, but they can't help goin'. They get so restless they can't help goin'—jus' to see what it's like, an' then the monster grabs 'em."

What was this? Just the ravings of a cracked old man? "I can see that haze of smoke off there," Holden said. "What is it? Forest fire?"

"No. It ain't no forest fire. Seems like people must be burnin' leaves. The posse that went out last night found piles of burnin' leaves. That's queer too, because who would gather leaves into piles and touch 'em off for no reason at all? I wouldn't want to get the smell of smoke on me—especially if I was a young girl. No sir. That damned thing would get pretty murderous if it smelled smoke on a beautiful young girl. And even if I was a young man like you, roamin' around on foot—it might think you were tryin' to keep it from gettin' the girl it was after. Yes sir—it might—"

He stared again with his rheumy eyes. Demented old fellow, of course. Holden had no chance to question him further. Suddenly, as though deciding he might have said too much to this stranger, he shot Holden a suspicious glance, turned and hobbled back to his porch.

"You better get goin', young feller," he warned.

"Oh—well, thanks," Holden said. He was aware of the old man staring after him as he took the little footpath past the decrepit fence.

HERE in the north, the summer night came swiftly—a red-purple twilight, with swiftly deepening shadows. Overhead a light haze obscured the stars. The air was oppressive, humid, windless. As he advanced over the broken ground, with the shadows gathering around him, Holden felt breathless, as though with a strange fear. There were no houses in this section. Behind him, the lights of the little village were winking. Then a dip of the ground obscured them, so that suddenly it was as though all signs of fellow humans had been swallowed and he was here alone, trudging forward through a stony desolation.

And now he could smell the distant pall of smoke—the acrid, pungent smell of burning leaves. Or was it something more than that? Holden's nostrils were dilating as he breathed in sharply. . . .

Presently, he topped a rise. The lights of what he knew must be Robert Martin's home sprang into view. It was a big rambling bungalow, sprawled alone in a rocky hollow. In the darkness its vague outlines made it seem a huge squat bug, crouching in the gloom. The windows were yellow spots, like grotesque, glaring eyes.

The footpath led over the hill and close to the side of the house. There was a little

chill of damp, cooler air down in here. Was it Holden's imagination, or was the faint smell of the distant smoke more plain—as though, clinging low to the ground?

And then something else so startled Holden that he stopped in the path and stared. Despite the breathless heat of the summer night, all the windows of the house were closed. They were all dim on this side, except one. Its yellow rectangle was close to Holden now. The shade was up, and he could see into a room. It was a bedroom, and a figure was moving in there.

Holden gasped, set his suitcase down at his feet as he stared in amazement. It was the girl he had seen in the drugstore! She was standing beside the bed, alone. The bedroom light fell full upon her. She was still wearing the filmy flowered crepe dress, but she had removed her hat, and her short black hair flared in a tousled profusion. If, in the drug store she had been furtive, quivering as though with some weird, illicit desire, now, she was all that and more. For a second she stood still. Her swift glance roving the bedroom. Then she went to the door, locked it and came back to the bureau. With hands that trembled, she quickly unwrapped the little package. As she turned back toward the bed, facing the window, Holden saw that she had a small bottle, seemingly of perfume. He could see that her fingers shook as she broke the seal of its stopper.

In that second the background of Holden's mind was a tumbled chaos of weird thought. The girl was swiftly loosening her dress now. She slipped the gown up over her arms and dropped it in a shimmering heap upon the floor. Her fingers shook as she daubed her glorious body with the perfume.

She was panting, shaking. The bedroom light put a rippling sheen on the long length of her silk clad legs and the white of her thighs. Then she put on her dress again and continued to tremble. And on her beautiful face and in her dark smouldering eyes, Holden saw so great a look of terror that it sent a shudder down his spine.

What ghastly thing was this? The girl was moving swiftly to her bureau now. She put the bottle in one of the drawers, locked it and put the key into her bosom. Then she unlocked the bedroom door, went out, closing it after her quietly.

For a moment Holden stood numbed. Then he picked up his little suitcase, went around to the front verandah and knocked on the big paneled door.

CHAPTER TWO

House of Horror

FOOTSTEPS within the house answered his knock. The door opened, disclosing the girl. Warm, soft lamplight from the big luxurious sitting room accentuated the curves of her utterly gorgeous body.

"I'm John Holden," he said. "Is this Mr. Martin's home? He's expecting me."

"Oh—yes, why of course. Come in, Mr. Holden." She stood aside to welcome him. He had sensed a vague, expectant terror on her face as she opened the door. It had faded now, and her sensuous red lips twisted into a charming smile as she offered her slim hand. "I'm his niece, Barbara James."

Her hand was cold. Young Holden, touching her, standing here so close to her in the warm lamplight, again felt that stirring of emotion he had felt in the drug store, and a few minutes ago as he glimpsed the beauty of her nakedness while she perfumed herself in the bedroom. Surely this was the most weirdly attractive girl he had ever seen. As she stood now close to him, he was conscious of her rounded breasts, so obvious under her filmy dress.

Then, as she dropped his hand and turned hastily to close the outer door by which he had entered, he suddenly felt his nostrils dilating. The living room, with all its windows shut had a close humidness, a breathless smell, which any unventilated room gets in summer. And with it, there was a heavy languorous odor of perfume.

"We did not expect you until the evening train," she was saying. "Did you walk over?"

"Yes. My suitcase isn't heavy. I'm sorry if I came too early. I—"

"Oh. Don't be silly." Her laugh was a throaty little trill. "I'll just have to cook a bit more supper. No trouble in that."

Holden was an exceedingly handsome young fellow. He was aware that the girl was gazing at him as though with a sudden startled admiration. He had noticed that in other girls on other occasions, but because there was nothing conceited about him, he had thought nothing of it. But this time, he abruptly realized, it was different. . . .

"Here's Mr. Holden, Uncle Robert—"

Robert Martin, his father's friend, was a tall, thin man of perhaps sixty, with a lined face and lack of color which gave him the appearance of fragile health. But it was belied by the agility of his step as he affably introduced himself and showed Holden to the bedroom which he was to occupy during the day or two of his visit.

They were presently back in the living room. Through its opened doorway, Holden could see into a dainty modern kitchen where Barbara was preparing the meal. She had changed her clothes now, to a simple linen skirt and a softly clinging knitted blouse. A big apron was tied around her.

For the few moments he had chatted with the grey-haired Robert Martin, Holden had almost forgotten the queer incidents which had preceded his arrival. He had been called here to draw up Martin's will. Quite evidently Martin was a fairly wealthy man.

"I sent for you," he said, "because your father and I were pretty good pals in the old days. They'll be some investigating to do regarding my Western properties—I've been a bit out of touch with things, living up here isolated these last years." He laughed. "I'll have to pay somebody quite a fee, and I know your father would have liked it to be you."

"Well, I'm certainly obliged," Holden said.

"And I didn't want to go into it with one of these hayseed local lawyers," Martin added. "No need of my business being made public around here. Nobody knows I'm a man of wealth. I'm leaving everything, this time, to Barbara . . . Oh —supper's all ready, dear?"

"Yes." The girl had appeared with a tray and was setting the table, informally in a corner of the living room. Martin had seemed to be warm, in the stuffy heat of the room, and as they were ready to sit down to the supper table, he went to one of the windows and flung it open. Did Barbara flash him a queer look? Holden certainly thought so. She was standing quite near him at the table. He could not miss the swift rise and fall of her rounded breasts with the straps of the big apron crossing over them. His own breath was rapid. The smell of the perfume on her flesh was slow, maddening intoxication. . . .

THEY began the meal. But within a minute Holden was conscious that something was wrong. The girl was restless, her hands were trembling as she served the food. Twice she glanced furtively at the open window, her nostrils quivering.

Holden was abruptly aware of the smell of smoke! And here was this girl, rest-

(Continued on page 90)

CHAMBER OF HORRORS

AS WE said some time ago in this department, we welcome all letters from all readers, whether they praise or blame. Well, our eyes were open when we made that statement, so we can't blame Mr. Charles Chastiny for taking advantage of his opportunity and jumping in with both feet. Says Mr. Chastiny:

Dear Sirs:

In your latest issue of Horror Stories, I see someone is asking for Vampire stories, and someone else wants stories with scenes laid in foreign and distant countries. Personally I wouldn't give a cent a gross for Vampire stories—and I think stories with their plots laid in this country are much more interesting. For some reason, foreign stories wander away from the plot and lose sight of the romantic interest of the story.

This brings me to another point. I have read Horror Stories for several years, though I have very little time for reading. I have always liked stories that are different and unusual, though not fantastic to such a degree as to be foolish.

The name, "Horror Stories," in itself leads a person to believe that it will be devoted to showing the atrocities that are happening around us every day. In this connection, there are several things I would like to see corrected.

You have had many good stories in the past: "Revolt of the Circus Freaks," and the story of a madman who, with a band of other men, was recreating the Inquisition, are two examples that occur to me at the present time. Lately, however, your authors are devoting too much space developing their plots and elaborating minor details. They don't reach their climax until the last paragraph of the next to the last page, and then they quickly fade it out. Why not run stories that come quickly to the point—which would be the maniac's

laboratory, cellar, etc? The purpose of the magazine is to convey thrills to the reader, so let's have stories that really live up to the name "Horror"; stories that reach a quick climax and prolong it. Don't have a quarter-page of horror and the rest of the story devoted to trivial movements and unimportant thoughts of the characters.

Please, please, give us the thrills we want—otherwise you've got a magazine just like a couple of dozen others on the newsstands. When I know what you can do, I don't want this to happen.

One more suggestion: why not illustrate a scene from a story on the cover?

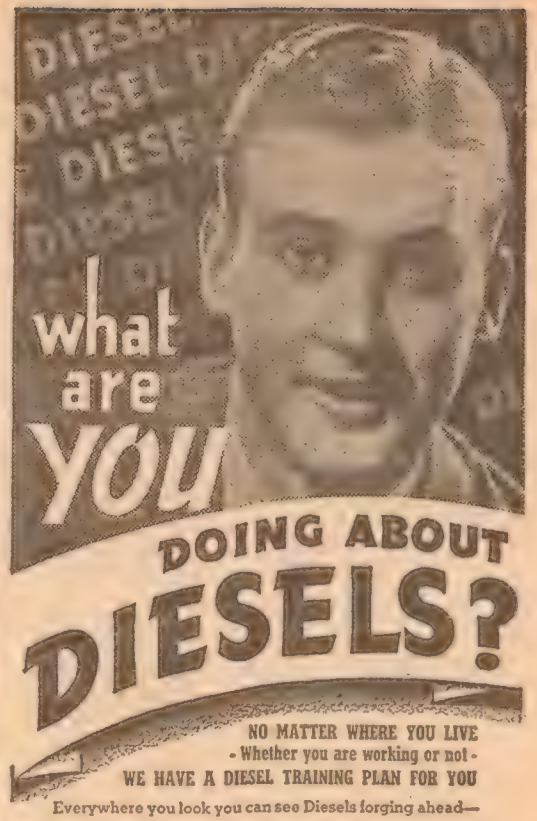
It would be so very much more interesting to read the story behind the fair maiden's trouble.

Yours for bigger and better thrills

Charles Chastiny

Holyoke, Mass.

Well, Mr. Chastiny, we're always in favor of bigger and better thrills ourselves. But we can't completely ignore plots and characters. Our authors write about things that *could* happen to you or to us, and they try to make their heroes and heroines seem like real living people. To us, it is more thrilling to read of something experienced by someone we can imagine to be ourselves, than to read of an experience of some artificial and unconvincing character. However, we do not think you will be disappointed in this issue of Horror Stories. We are grateful for your letter and we think your suggestion about the cover illustration is well worth thinking about. What is the opinion of our other readers? Remember, everyone's invited to join the fight. No holds barred!



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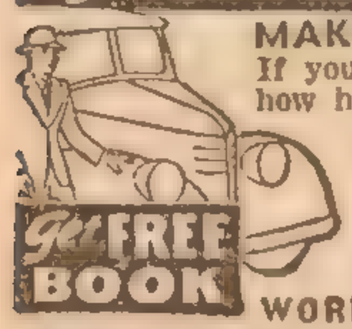

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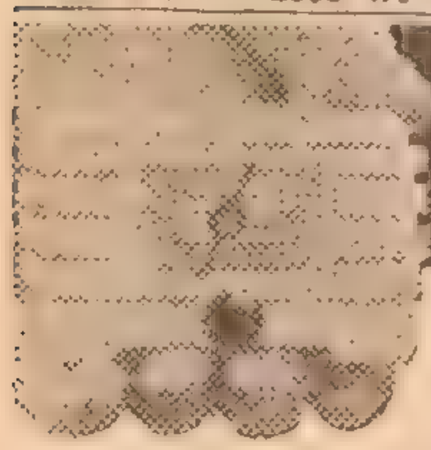

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(Continued from page 87)

less—acting queerly. . . . The old man's words came leaping back at him: *"They get restless—urged—so they can't help going, just to see what it's like—an' then the monster grabs 'em—"*

"Good God, Babs! Close that window. I shouldn't have opened it." The words seemed to burst with an impulse of horror from Martin. His thin face was suddenly drained of its color. Then as Barbara went to the window and slammed it shut, he turned to Holden. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." He was trying to smile. "You see we—we've had quite a shock up here. There have been some deaths—three young girls—"

"I heard something about it," Holden murmured. "A bearded old fellow down at the fork below told me."

"That's old Jim Blaine," Martin said. "He and lots of the ignorant villagers are talking about a smoke monster. I suppose it was some hysterical girl who started the thing—claimed that there is a roving shape out on these ridges—something which the smell of smoke brings out of its lair—makes it attack young girls—and kill them—"

"But young girls—have been killed?" Holden said.

Martin shook his thin shoulders. "Yes. Three of them," he said grimly.

A little cry escaped from Babs, and Martin swung to her. "You're right dear. We shouldn't talk of the ghastly thing—"

The talk drifted from it presently. Then the meal was finished, and Babs went into the kitchen to clear up the dishes. With her departure, Holden stirred in his chair. And suddenly he was startled at his thoughts—at the strange emotion which he realized was stirring within him. Was it only his thoughts of the girl's voluptuousness? Or was it partly, perhaps, that weird perfume which was upon her? Whatever it was, he felt an urgent desire

to take her into his arms—to fondle and caress her. . . .

From where they were sitting, Martin's back was to the kitchen, but Holden could see out there; and his gaze kept straying, watching the girl as she moved quietly, deftly about her household tasks. And then abruptly he saw her standing still in the middle of the kitchen—standing tense, as though listening.

Holden may have gasped, but fortunately Martin, intent upon something he was saying about Holden's father years ago, did not seem to notice. In the kitchen, Barbara suddenly stood still. Her hand reached into the bosom of her dress, drew forth the little bottle of perfume. Swiftly she dabbed it on her ears, sprinkled it in on her breast. Then again she seemed to be listening. Presently she went to the kitchen door, opened it a little.

". . . your father and I—many good times together, John—"

"Eh? Oh yes, of course. I can imagine, Mr. Martin—"

Holden hardly knew what he was saying. His heart was racing. Out there at the kitchen door he could see Barbara, talking furtively through the slit to someone outside. Then she reached, drew something from her stocking, handed it through the door. Her raised knee closed the door abruptly, and as she turned back, the kitchen light gleamed on her face. There was terror on it. But there was also something else—something that looked like lust!

For another hour, after the girl joined them in the living room, Holden sat tense, with his heart pounding. Then Martin went to his room for a while, saying that he wanted to prepare some of his papers to show Holden how his affairs would line up in the drawing of his will. It left Holden alone, with the beautiful, voluptuous girl beside him. From her alluring body, stretched in a wicker chair, the smell of the perfume was like a strange, perhaps malevolent aura. He was hardly conscious of the trivialities of their talk. Her slumbrous dark eyes, whenever their gaze came to his face, made his heart leap.

FOR half an hour he fought with the emotions stirring within him—fighting the impulse to leap up and seize this girl in his arms. Always he expected that any moment Martin would return, but quite evidently his papers were absorbing him in his bedroom. Then as Babs chanced to meet his gaze, Holden saw the rising and falling of her breast suddenly halt its movement—her breath stopped as she stared at him.

God! It was a look of seduction! He could not miss it—a swiftly passionate look, so incongruous in her aspect of uneasy terror that it made him shudder, even while it caused his heart to leap.

"Why—" he murmured. "Why, Babs—" His hand reached to touch her; his heart was racing. Was it this damnable perfume? He did not care; he welcomed it. "Babs—" he gasped huskily. "I want—"

The words died in his throat. He tensed, and he saw the blood draining from Bab's face with her sudden rush of terror. Outside the house a cry had sounded—a girl's scream of agony. Both of them leaped to their feet, stared at each other. Then he rushed for the outer door, with Babs close behind him.

The scream had died. He flung open the door. In the outer dimness, where just a little moonlight straggled down from broken, sullen clouds, a white blob lay on the rocks, close by the house. It was a naked girl.

"Martha Peters," Babs gasped. "Oh dear God—"

They bent over the girl where she lay crumpled among the rocks—a slim girl with long, lithe legs, sleek rounded hips and long black hair which lay in a tangle across her breast. Her youthful,

beautiful body was a gruesome horror now as she lay in dying agony. Slashes of crimson crossed her abdomen and extended to her legs and thighs. Her face, with blood gushing from her mouth, was a horrible welter out of which her glazing eyes stared unseeing.

For a second Holden stood numbed. And then as his gaze crossed the nearby stony yard beside the house, a moving blob was apparent. The murderous monster! A weird, grey-black upright thing with smoke rising from it. For an instant it stood peering from beside a stunted tree near the opposite end of the house. Then silently it shifted forward with the smoke from it curling in a great spiral, merging with its grey-black outline as though the whole thing were a mere vapor. In a moment it was going faster. Before Holden could move from his frozen horror, it passed behind the house and vanished!

CHAPTER THREE

The Posse Finds—Death

"BABS! You wait here! Don't move!" The shackles of horror fell from Holden. He dashed forward to the end of the house. The smell of the smoke was still apparent in the heavy night air. The dim length of the house showed nothing. But at the other corner there were smoke layers as though the thing had just gone past. Holden ran; came to the back of the house. There was nothing. The ground sloped up a stony rise to a little summit-crest. Was there a vague smoky shape up there, just plunging over the top? It could have been the grey monster-shape, or just a spiral of the foggy smoke which had been drifting down from the distant upland ridge all evening.

"John! John, my God, what's happened?" It was Martin's voice from within the house. Holden turned, ran for the kitchen doorway where his host was standing.

"John—that scream—didn't I hear—"

"A girl," Holden gasped. "Babs says it's Martha Peters."

"Oh my God—one of them, right here! And she's—"

"Attacked—like the others, yes. Out in front—" Holden led him through the house. They dashed across the living room. Outside, like a frozen statue of horror, Babs stood still staring down at the ghastly body of the naked girl.

"Dead," Babs murmured. "She—just died. Oh, what are we going to do?"

"You have a telephone," Holden said. "We'll call the village—get the sheriff—"

He stopped at a gasp from Martin. In the moonlight, the older man's face was ashen. He gripped Holden in a paroxysm of terror. "Send for the sheriff?" he gasped. "Oh my God, no!"

"Not that!" Babs murmured.

Amazed, Holden stared at them. "Why not? We've got to report this—"

"No!" Babs gasped again. "Oh John, no—please—"

Martin's shaking hands clutched Holden by the shoulders. "We—we've got to hide this—this body," Martin was stammering. "You don't understand. I'll explain—some other time. Hide it—here in the cellar—"

"Yes, that's it," Babs murmured. "Here in the cellar. Oh John, please—please trust me."

Martin was dragging the ghastly body into the house. Weird thoughts were sweeping Holden so that for a second he stood hesitating. Babs was standing close to him. Then suddenly her arms went around him, her body pressed against his. "Oh John, please trust me—" The smell of her perfumed flesh enveloped him. The soft warmth of her palpitating body was like an electric current surging through him. "Oh John—Oh my darling—No!

No, I didn't mean that. Oh please don't think—"

"Think what?" he murmured with tense vehemence. "Babs don't you understand what you're doing? Tell me now—why must we hide this murdered girl? You've got to tell me now—"

"No! Dear God—Oh John, please—"

From within the house Martin's agitated voice was floating out: "The posse—they're coming! See them up there! Holden—Holden for God's sake, quick! Help me with this thing—"

The posse! Far up the dim moonlit stony slope, moving yellow-red lights were visible. Men, coming in a group, with flaming torches. The distant murmur of their voices was audible now in the heavy night-silence.

"Oh John, please—" Bab's clinging, voluptuous lure made Holden's senses reel. And then she gasped, "John—you do what we want now, and I'll—tell you all about it later. I—I'll come to your bedroom later tonight—"

From the living room doorway, Martin called in terror, "John—hurry—help me get it into the cellar—"

"You'll come?" Holden suddenly heard himself murmur.

"Oh yes. Yes, I promise—" She loosed herself from him. For just another second he hesitated and then he ran with her into the house. The three of them were conspirators now—hiding the gruesome thing which had been Martha Peters . . . They carried it down into the cellar.

"We—I can bury it later tonight—or dig a place for it here tomorrow," Martin said hurriedly. "Babs—that blood up there in the living room—wash it away. But I guess we can keep them out of the house. Oh my God—if they see the blood out there on the ground where she lay—"

They did not see it . . . The body was hidden in the coal bin . . . blood smears upstairs were wiped away. . . .

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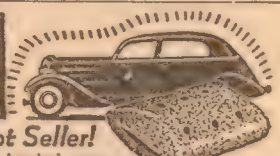

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Holden hated himself for what he was doing—but his pulses were pounding with the thought of Babs, coming to his room later tonight. . . .

The voices up the slope were louder now. The yellow-red glare of the torches painted the living room windows where Holden, Martin and Babs were seated.

"I'LL—go out and see them," Martin abruptly murmured. Through one of the windows the group of men with flaming torches in their hands was visible as it passed down the slope a hundred feet or so from the house. And Martin added tremulously, "What—what do you suppose that is they're carrying?"

It was an oblong thing on a crude stretcher—a thing with a cloth thrown over it. But down one side a white leg dangled. The shapely leg of a girl . . . ghastly, horrible, with crimson streaks upon it.

"Oh dear God—" Babs gasped.

Martin ran to the door, with a muttered curse, flung it open. With Babs clinging to him and Holden silent beside him, he hailed the men.

"What is it? What happened?"

They stopped. Two or three of them came in a little group, and Martin went down the path part way to meet them.

"Oh, dear God—dear God . . ." Holden was aware that Babs was again clinging to him, the soft warmth of her voluptuous body pressing him. But there was nothing about her now of furtive passion—nothing but a poignant terror that shook her so that it seemed she might faint within his supporting arm.

"Easy," he whispered. "Take it easy, Babs—" He pulled her head against him, as for an instant one of the men removed the cloth from the stretcher to show Martin the horribly crimsoned, mutilated body of what had been a beautiful girl.

"That smoke thing got her—I knew

it would—" The white bearded Jim Blaine, far more spry that he looked, was among the posse. "My grand-daughter—poor little Essie—"

"Essie Blaine—" Babs muttered.

The flaming torches showed Holden that the pallid young drug clerk was among the villagers. He had come forward—bareheaded, the torchlight gleaming on his sleek hair. He was talking to Martin now.

"Who's that young fellow?" Holden murmured tensely. "The one with the sleek hair talking to your uncle?"

"That—Oh, just a clerk down in the village."

"A friend of yours?"

"No! Oh, no. A fellow named Gregg. I—I've only met him in the drug store." Holden let it pass. A new paroxysm of terror was upon the clinging girl. Terror that her uncle might be exposed? Did she know that Martin was guilty of these ghastly murders? Apprehension that this posse now might see the blood out there on the rocks in front of the house; that they might come in, find the ghastly thing in the cellar . . . But they didn't. Martin was coming back now. The torchlight procession with its gruesome burden was moving on down the slope.

Babs unloosed herself from the tense Holden. They went into the house as Martin joined them. Holden closed the door. He turned, and saw the girl swiftly whispering to her uncle. Telling him that she had fixed it with Holden? Martin nodded tremulously.

"Well, that's that, John," he said drably. "You do trust us? Barbara says you'll trust us."

"Yes," Holden muttered.

"I'll tell you about all this ghastly thing in the morning, John. We'll bury that—that body of Martha Peters in the morning." He was livid to the lips. Trembling; shattered. He sank into a chair. "Babs—Babs dear—would you get me a drink? Just a little of the Scotch—I feel a bit faint."

He sat sipping the drink, trembling. "I'd rather not talk about any of it tonight, John. You—you'll wait—"

"Yes," Holden agreed.

Babs had momentarily gone to her bedroom. She had suggested, with a queer sidelong glance at Holden, that they were all tired and should go to bed. Then presently she came back. She had taken off her skirt and blouse. She now wore a dainty, pale blue negligée which swept the ground to her slippered feet. More than ever, the curves of her lovely body were apparent.

"I'll finish up in the kitchen," she said. She bent over Martin. "You're tired, uncle—"

"Yes. Yes, I guess I am," he agreed.

As she passed close to Holden, the perfume of her flesh was wafted to him with a new poignancy. A moment later she was in the kitchen. And then suddenly her scream sounded. . . .

HOLDEN gasped. He and Martin leaped to their feet. Babs was standing petrified, staring at the kitchen window. . . . "What—what is it?" Martin gasped.

She screamed again. From her shaking hand the lamp slipped and crashed to the floor. Flame puffed at the bottom of her filmy negligée—spreading little blue tongues of the burning oil. As Holden ran forward he seemed to see a glaring face at the window—a white-bearded face, glowering with murderous menace. Then it was gone.

"Babs! John! She's on fire—" Martin gasped. The terrified girl had turned, started to run. Flames were licking at her clothes. With a leap, Holden was upon her, throwing her to the floor with himself sprawled upon her. His body smothered the fire.

"You're all right now, Babs. Lie still

a minute." Her negligée was only smouldering, but on the nearby oilcloth the little circle of burning oil still licked with blue tongues and a wave of thick acrid smoke rolled up. But Holden had the fire out in a moment. Then as he stood up, drawing the frightened girl with him, Martin gave an eerie, ghastly cry!

Martin stood there shaking; his face chalk-white, his nostrils dilating. "The smoke—it's here—here with us!" Unutterable horror contorted his face, choked his voice. "Babs—get those clothes off—you—you're smouldering—"

He started toward her, and then shrank back. "Holden—" His voice rose almost to a scream. "Get those clothes off her—"

Holden saw Babs wildly plucking at her negligée with shaking hands. Little patches of the filmy stuff were red with the still-glowing fire. Holden leaped to help her. Over in a corner of the kitchen he saw Martin cowering with terror.

"Babs—you're all right—" Holden gasped.

"No, No! Get me loose from this—"

She had stripped the garment from her shoulders and breasts. Holden gripped the lower part of its skirt, riffling it between his palms where it was charring. But she tore it from him—pulled and ripped until it was scattered from her and she stood naked, palpitating, quivering with terror. Like an intoxicating wave, the perfume of her satin flesh surged at Holden. But the smell of the fire was upon her, mingling with it. And on her legs and body, the white flesh was smudged where the charring garment had left its mark.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fires of Passion

WOULD she come? In his bedroom, later that night, Holden sat on his bed listening to the silence of the house, and the heavy blank silence of the dark night outside. He was still dressed; his bedroom light was out; he had left his door slightly ajar. Would she come? How could she explain anything about this weird, ghastly thing, save that her uncle whom she so obviously loved was a fiendish, hideous murderer? And what would Holden do about it? He did not face that. His heart was racing with his thoughts of the girl . . . her voluptuous, perfumed body. . . . That weird perfume. Why did she use it? To excite herself? And to excite him? Other girls around this neighborhood perhaps had been using it . . . girls who had become restless—with an urge upon them. . . .

The thoughts made Holden's mind sweep back to that pallid drug-clerk. . . . Surely there was more to this than the guilt of Robert Martin, with his niece frantically trying to protect him! At the kitchen door, Barbara had spoken to someone; had given someone something from her stocking. . . .

An hour had passed since Martin had gone to bed. Down the hall he had closed his bedroom door. Surely by now he must be asleep. Babs had closed her own door. Five minutes more passed. Then ten minutes. . . .

Then suddenly he thought he heard Bab's bedroom door furtively open. There was just a vague squeak; and a patter of footsteps . . . his own door opening.

He whispered, "Babs—" His heart was racing, seeming to pound in his throat. The odor of her perfume came through his doorway, like a wave preceding her—an exotic wave, spreading out over the dim bedroom.

"John—" With a quick flurry of a silken garment she came in and swiftly closed the door upon them.

"You came," he whispered. He fought to hold his rising emotion in check. Whatever this ghastly thing, he must know its details now. . . . That restless look of terror which he had seen upon Babs

earlier in the evening. As though some roaming thing out on the ridge must be luring her. . . .

He drew her to sit with him on his bed. The small bedroom lamp was turned very low but there was enough light so that he could see her—a pale grey, silken garment drawn close around her. There was passion in her dark eyes—passion that fired him. But mingled with it, stamped on her beautiful face, there was terror too. Terror because she feared he might expose her uncle? Surely something more than that was terrorizing her!

"You're frightened," he said grimly. With a sudden vehemence rising in him he reached and seized her shoulders. "You said you were coming here to tell me what all this is about. You can guess what I want to know. Why did we have to hide that body in the cellar here? Your uncle's terror. You—your damned perfume—I saw you putting it on yourself. I saw you buy it this afternoon—"

That made her gasp. "You—saw me buy it?"

"Yes. That drug-clerk, Gregg, sold it to you. And tonight you took something from your stocking, and gave it to somebody who came to the kitchen door."

"Oh John, please—I—I just came to tell you now—I—I don't want to explain anything to you about uncle—not tonight. In the morning. . . ."

He shook her. "I can imagine what you'll say about your uncle. What about the perfume? You're using it to excite yourself and me—"

The startled look on her face astonished him. "Oh John—is it—is it the perfume making me feel this way? I never realized—"

This was no pretense. She was startled; confused. "Then why do you use it?" he demanded.

"He—I thought it would keep the—the monster from being attracted to me. He—the monster—he gets excited at the smell of smoke. Ghastly—horrible excitement—"

"And you believe that stuff, Babs? A monster of the smoke—"

"Oh yes! Oh dear God, yes. I know it, John. Don't ask me how—Oh please—Oh, I'm not going to tell you anything else—"

"You've been putting that perfume on yourself," he murmured. "And you didn't know the nature of the perfume? And other girls—doing it too? Whom did you meet at the kitchen door? And what did you give him?"

HE was gripping her by the shoulders again; shaking her. "Oh my darling," she gasped. "Don't—don't ask me things like that. I can't tell you. I—we—uncle and I—have to pay him money. That's what I gave through the kitchen doorway. Oh dear God, I shouldn't have told you so much."

"Well, you're going to tell me the rest of it," he insisted. "If you don't, I'll go in to your uncle—have it out with him—"

"No! You've got to get out of here, John! Go away! And never tell anything of what you've seen or done here. Oh please—won't you go—"

He laughed grimly. "Of course I won't go—" Then suddenly she had twitched away from him and stood up. Her fingers fumbled at her neck, and the sleek silk garment went back over her shoulders, opened in front and dropped to the floor behind her. Holden gasped at the beauty of her body. . . .

"You—want me, John?" she murmured. "I'm yours—if you won't tell that we've got the body of Mary Peters in the cellar."

She was terrified, but the sweep of her own passion rose so that she thrust herself upon Holden. A hot wave of the perfume, released from her exposed flesh,

surged up into his face as his arms went around her.

"Babs darling . . . so beautiful. . . ." He knew it was madness as he held her hungrily against him. Madness, but he didn't care. . . . Was that a distant sound in the house? A little thump, outside down the hall? He hardly heard it. But Babs had heard it, and suddenly Holden felt her little fists beating against his chest, trying to push him away.

"John—what was that?"

It checked his wild, passionate embrace; steadied him. He lifted her up and she sat beside him, her hand trembling on his arm as they listened. There was no sound now; nothing but their own panting breaths in the silence. With a gesture to her, he went to the door. God, what was this? There was smoke in the hall! Smoke in thin layers, drifting along the hall—pungent, acrid like the smell of burning kerosene.

"Oh my God—" Babs only breathed it as her naked body swayed against him. "From—from uncle's room," she murmured.

He could see that Martin's bedroom door was open. He was hardly aware that Babs was with him as he reached the dark doorway. The bedroom was dim with straggling moonlight through its window—moonlight on Martin's rumpled empty bed. Smoke was in the room—little tongues of bluish flame over there in the distant shadowed corner.

The monster! It was there, crouching down by the floor—a long-nosed, ghastly thing grey-black, with fire creeping upon it and smoke swirling up from it. The monster, crouching, ready to leap. Babs screamed. Her frantic clutch tried to stop Holden, but he flung her off and pounced. His body landed full on the crouching thing. It was solid under him. His fists shot against it. And then suddenly he gasped, with horror flooding him so that for a second he stared. Then he leaped up; stood frozen, staring down, with Babs huddling beside him, clutching at him.

The monster on the floor hadn't moved. It made no attack. Just sat huddled, inert. And now, as though the impact of Holden's body had knocked it off balance, it was swaying and then it fell sidewise, hitting the floor with a thump.

It was dead. The tiny kerosene flames had died upon it. Holden saw that it was a man in a long grey-black asbestos robe, with a gas-mask over his face. The handle of a knife protruded from his chest—a knife buried to its hilt, with blood spreading out in a crimson welter on the robe. And the mask now had been knocked askew. The livid face, with eyes staring, showed that it was Martin.

"Oh, uncle dear," Babs was murmuring. "You—you did yield to the temptation?" She flung herself down. "Oh uncle, I was afraid you—you might attack me some time. So I—I perfumed myself. I wouldn't let the smell of smoke get upon me—"

Holden bent and lifted the sobbing girl. "He's dead, Babs."

BUT Martin wasn't quite dead. The sound of Babs' voice seemed momentarily to give him a little strength. He murmured faintly.

"I didn't—yield to the temptation, Babs. I'm not this monstrous fiend. He—put my old robe and mask on me—and then—stabbed me. You—tell John how you have tried to help me all these years." Blood in his throat choked him, but he struggled on. "Tell him I didn't start any piles of burning leaves to make smoke around here. God knows, smoke was what I always tried to avoid. I haven't killed these girls. In the old days, when the madness was on me, I just wanted to frighten, and fondle them. You know that, Babs—you tell him. . . ."

Ghastly obsession! Holden stood numbed as Babs piteously poured it out.

She was an orphan. Martin for years had taken care of her. He loved her. And then, years ago, she had learned of his obsession. How it had come upon him, back in his early boyhood, she had never known. He had lived in the country then; had wanted to start little burning fires of leaves, with the smell of the smoke on his flesh and in his nostrils so weirdly exciting him. And then he had wanted a girl, to enjoy it with him, perhaps with her clothes on fire, so that he was thrilled in snatching off her clothes, burning his hands as he put out the fire. Fondling her, with the smoke enveloping them. . . .

What a ghastly aberration! For all his life he had fought with it. Then he had come here with Babs, to these isolated stony uplands where there were no fires to cause smoke. And he was going to leave all his fortune to Babs.

"I guess—I guess he feared that he would die," Babs was murmuring now. "The fight—so horrible—it was breaking his health. I could see it."

And always there was Babs' secret terror, that she herself might lure him. She always used heavy perfume, trying not to arouse him. . . .

"And then—Oh my God, John—the smoke began around here. Queer fires. Then these murders—all to be blamed on uncle, and we knew it, of course. We paid more money, but it didn't help."

"He—made me give him this suit and mask," the dying Martin faintly gasped. "He—has the proof on me—what I used to do years ago. And of course he's whispered it around the village here. Old Jim Blaine suspects me—I could see that tonight. So you see, John—we—we had to hide that body. And you, Babs dear—you got that smell of burning oil on you when you dropped the lamp. That—and the damned perfume. It—was a horrible temptation to me—but I—I withstood it—"

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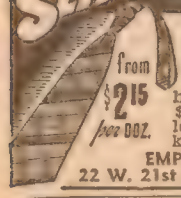

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gasp from Babs came too late. Holden was sure aware of a vague sound. Then in the moonlit rectangle of window a blob had appeared—a man whose arm and hand went up and back—and then forward as he hurled something. Holden was scrambling to his feet. He was aware of the whizzing chunk of rock. It struck his head with a roar and a blinding burst of light. He felt his knees crumple as he went down. The light in his head faded. All his senses faded. There was only Babs' wild scream of terror, dying away as he was swept off into the abyss of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Way of a Beast

IT seemed as though the emptiness was being filled, slowly. Holden was conscious that he was lying on a soft rug; and as the roaring in his head gradually subsided, as though emerging out of it he heard the murmured blending of voices. At first they seemed very faint, far away. Then he realized it was only his dulled, still-blurred senses, for with his returning strength, the voices strengthened so that he knew they were quite close to him.

"Lie still, Babs. Let me hold you—stop struggling, you little vixen—"

"Let me go. Oh please—"

"Yeh. Wouldn't I be a fool? I've worked pretty hard and carefully for this, Babs. Not for you—you're just an incident—a pleasant little episode. . . ."

The man's voice was vaguely familiar. Holden knew that his eyes were open now—like a swimming phantasmagoria, vague outlines of the room were taking form. With returning strength he tried to move his legs. They were bound; his ankles lashed together. And he could feel that his wrists were crossed and tied behind him. He could see his ankles now—

a white linen sheet had been torn into strips to bind them.

He was lying on a rug, between the bed and the door. He could see the bed—and the naked, pink-white body of Babs, lying there with the figure of a man sitting beside her. It was the pallid, slack-jawed, sleek haired drug clerk—the fellow they had called Gregg. His hand caressed her thigh; then it went to touch her breast. At her little cry, her futile struggles, he rasped, "You're a fool."

"Oh please—let me go."

"You said that before, an' that's out." He forced her toward him and, as momentarily she went limp, he chuckled. "That's better. I killed your uncle. Sure! Why not? You didn't know I was onto the kind of a guy he was—way back in New York, five years ago. He was paying me money then. Didn't he ever tell you?"

"No—no—not then."

"Well, just by accident I got onto him—he was raisin' hell with a girl. It was in an empty lot—there was a big smoking fire right next door—anyways, I got him out of that jam, and that's when he started payin' me money."

A moan was her only answer. Holden's head was still swimming and he could feel his body bathed with the cold sweat of weakness. A lump was on his head, with blood matting his hair. But his strength was coming back. He twitched at his legs and arms, but the knotted sheet held him.

"An' then that damned uncle of yours tried to duck me," Gregg was saying. "Not so much the money—" His lascivious chuckle came again. "I got the idea I could get him involved with you—an' then hand you over to me. That would've been nice, eh sweetie? But he wouldn't fall for it—he ducked out with you an' it took me four years to find him up here. He thought he was cured of that damned curse that he had. Cured! Hell—it wasn't hard for me to start it up again, was it?"

"Oh dear God—let me alone—I—I understand what you've done—"

His caresses wrenched a sob from her. "He's dead. What more do you want?" she gasped.

"YOU," he chuckled. "Don't you see how I've worked it out? He's dead here—a maniacal suicide. They'll say that he killed and mutilated these girls because he was a lusting fiend. They'll find one in your cellar. That's where you hid the body of Mary Peters, isn't it? An' they'll find this young man of yours dead here—arms an' legs bound an' his head bashed in. An' they'll find you naked, strangled and slashed. They'll think your demented uncle did it, of course. Why would they think anything else?"

In spite of the man's murderous cruelty, he was a clever schemer.

"Why—would you want to do this?" she gasped. "I—I'll keep on paying you money."

"I don't have to trust you, little sweetheart. You paid me the last—that little wad of bills out of your stocking tonight. Why? Well, I bullied your uncle into giving me his power of attorney, so that I can do just about what I like with his Western properties. An' all the time he was thinkin' he could trick me! Import a lawyer up here, to look after those Western properties. An' then make a will—I heard him talkin' about it to you yesterday—a will, leavin' everything to you—an' it would revoke my power of attorney. An' then what? Why, he was goin' to kick the bucket. Commit suicide, sacrifice himself so you'd be straightened out."

Poor Martin—in the grip of a thing like this! Again Holden was silently struggling with his bonds. Up on the bed the lamplight glinted on Babs' pink-white flesh—on her breasts. Gregg was reaching toward them now, chuckling.

"We don't need smoke to get us ex-

cited, eh little sweetie? My perfume does it better? I'm goin' to make still another fortune out of 'Excitement.' It'll get a lot of publicity out of this affair—they'll find quite a few bottles of it in your bedroom. I've had a lot of fun experimenting with it. A number of girls around here have enjoyed using it. What they've done with me—well, the ones I didn't kill won't tell about it. That name I've given it—I own that name. I'll make a fortune out of it. It's my own invention—volatile essence of an aphrodisiac. I think maybe we better have a little more on you now." He was fumbling in his pocket.

"No— Oh please—no!"

"Why not? It's swell stuff. Not only the smell of it—" A bottle was in his hand. He was spraying it on her. "Burns the flesh quite a bit, doesn't it? Feels swell, eh—when you're in the mood? That's harmless. Just a distillate of capsicum—my own invention—"

She was writhing now and he held her body against him, panting. "Quite a bit stronger than what you've been using, eh little Babs? I wouldn't use this commercially—just for my special customers. Now—take it easy—kiss me now—"

"No! You fiend—get away from me—" she lashed out at him.

On the floor rug Holden was jerking his bonds. A curse escaped him; but the struggling couple on the bed did not hear it.

A LOW scraping sound behind Holden made him turn his head. Beside him on the floor, Martin in his ghastly masquerade again was feebly twitching. With gruesome dying strength he had drawn the knife from the wound in his chest. He tried to say something, but blood drooling from his mouth choked him. And then he very faintly gasped, "I can do—one last good thing anyway." His bloody knife trailed on the bonds at Holden's wrists. Holden pressed against it. His wrists came loose. The knife, sliding from Martin's dying clutch, fell and hit the floor with a little click.

From the bed Gregg gasped, "What in hell? Babs, did you hear that? What was it?"

In that second or two Holden had seized the knife, slashed his ankles loose and leaped to his feet. Gregg was trying to turn on the bed. But Babs had seen the rising Holden. Her pink-white arms went up, slithered like slim serpents around Gregg's neck.

"You—you wanted me so much—" Her breathless murmur was wild with hysteria. "Come down with me now. I'll—hold you—"

For that second he struggled, and Holden pounced. The long thin-bladed knife went into Gregg's back. Grimly Holden left it there; seized the drug clerk by the shoulders, jerked him away from Babs.

"Damn you—damn you—" Holden was muttering. He raised the villain's slight body up and flung it across the room, following with a leap.

But Gregg was already slumped on the bed—dead.

Then Holden was on the bed, holding Babs against him. She was shuddering, whimpering, but her soft arms tried to press him closer.

"Oh John—"

"You're all right now. You're safe, Babs darling—"

"Yes. Poor Uncle, he's—dead?"

"Perhaps it's better that way, Babs."

"I know it."

She shuddered; and then she was quiet, pressing against him, her hand caressing his hair.

And John Holden was conscious only of the warmth and softness of her dear, palpitating little body which would be his to love, forever.

THE END

(Continued from page 23)

splashed with blood, she looked like a ravenous harpy as she bent over her grisly task.

There was something wrong about that cadaver-carving; something monstrously wrong—and in a few minutes Kenneth knew what it was!

Inside the excavated torso the woman spread a thin rubber sheet. Unlocking one of the wall cabinets, she brought out hundreds of those little vials of cocaine and packed them into the body until the cavity was filled; packed others in the emptied cranium and cemented the top of the skull back in place! With a needle and thread she sewed up the corpse and then poured over her stitches a liquid that reeked with ether; a collodion compound which quickly solidified and concealed the stitches entirely!

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That was what Augie Seaman had meant by his threat that Kenneth would get a "bellyful" of trouble! He was to be murdered and handed over to this hag to be disembowled and filled with thousands of dollars worth of drugs!

Now the evil crone was injecting embalming fluid into the limbs of the corpse, was preparing it for burial so that no officer who might inspect it would have the slightest suspicion of what it contained. Gelid horror filled Kenneth's brain as he watched her ply her abominable needle on the scalp she had smoothed back into place—Satan's seamstress, crouching like a repulsive vulture over the corpse of a man she must have known in life only a few hours earlier!

Nothing held any meaning for these callous fiends—nothing but the fortune

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they were wringing out of the nefarious drug traffic. Even their own members were tossed to this harpy, to serve as drug-carriers the moment death eliminated them.

And it was to this cold-blooded hag that he had entrusted the girl those devils were hunting!

Now he understood why she was fleeing through the wilderness. Now he understood her pitiful terror. No doubt she, like him, was to be murdered and stretched out on that ghastly table!

KENNETH DRISCOLL'S fists clenched so tightly that his knuckles ached. His every impulse urged him to spring from the closet and throttle that hag, to speed to the girl and get her out of that fiend-ridden valley—but caution checked his rage. They were too many for him. A dozen he had seen, and there probably were even more. If he overcame the old woman and tied her up, her absence might be discovered at any moment—and that might bring the wolf-pack down upon the girl before he could reach her. Stealth was his surest weapon; he must reach her and get her away before the hue and cry was raised.

That helpless waiting was intolerable, but at last old Hetty was finished with her macabre task. She turned out the light and left the charnel room; and in a few minutes he dared to follow her, to reach the doorway and step out into the night.

But where was that hut from which the hag had come? Somewhere in that valley. Somewhere near the sanitarium, he estimated, but his best course was to retrace his steps to the wreck and then back along the bottom of the gully, even though every moment might mean the girl's death.

Might mean worse than her death!

Suddenly it occurred to him that old

Hetty had made no mention of the girl's whereabouts when Dr. Wenzel had ordered his men to search for her. The old woman was keeping her for some diabolical purpose of her own!

That appalling thought spurred him into a run, but he had gone no more than a hundred yards when he suddenly brought up short, his ears tingling with the piercing screams that keened out over the valley.

The girl's death-scream!

He was too late to save her—but a flaming rage surged into his brain and took command of his body. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he charged into the brush, racing blindly, drawn by that heart-rending terror tocsin.

CHAPTER FIVE

Harpy's Prey

DRISCOLL did not wait to try the door when he panted up to the house from which those screams still resounded. With his head between his hunched shoulders, he plunged through one of the windows, landed in a dark living room and groped his way across it to a corridor at the rear. Like a magnet the maddened shrieks drew him to a door that flung inward when he turned the knob and put his weight against it.

A door that catapulted him into a maniac-made hell!

With horror-filled eyes he gazed at the girl's almost nude body dangling from the ceiling, at the burly creature who wrestled with her while a weird, beast-like cacophony spilled from his slavering lips. The fellow had flung himself upon her, had wrapped an arm around one of her desperately kicking legs, to hold her helpless while he groped for the knife that lay on the floor beside him.

In his savage frenzy to subdue this soft, white creature that fought him so maddeningly, Homer had not heard the crashing glass or the pound of Driscoll's footsteps. His warped mind caught no inkling of danger until the intruder was half-way across the room—and then it was too late. With a desperate lunge Kenneth threw himself the rest of the way, and his outstretched fingers snatched the knife just as the imbecile's hand was about to close on it.

Bellowing with frustrated rage, the fellow relinquished his hold on that white body and charged this new antagonist. His thick-boned skull came driving in like a battering-ram, his great arms clawing crab-wise to seize his victim—and Kenneth leaped right into their deadly embrace. Deep into the berserk madman's heart he drove the long blade—again and again, while Homer's snarling face lost its savagery and pathetic bewilderment dawned in his wide eyes.

Something about that big, square face caught Kenneth's attention, something that tugged at his memory. He knew that he had never seen the fellow before, and yet—

The big body was dead before it crashed to the floor, and before that Ken was across the room, unhitching the rope from its peg and lowering the girl gently to the floor.

Dorothy Cooper's arms were so stiff from the strain they had undergone that she could hardly move them when the knife slashed through the rope around her wrists. For a long moment an agony of relief surged through them—and then, somehow, she was in the arms of her rescuer, was sobbing and laughing at once while her lips found his and clung to them as if she would never again let him go.

"Watch it—darling," Kenneth terminated with an effort the caress which was sending thrilling tendrils through his whole being. "Careful—you are on the verge of hysteria, and you can't afford that now. We need all our wits and strength—"

"I know—I know," she gasped, "but—but I told myself that you would come—I *felt* it, even though I did not believe it—and you did! I don't even know your name—and yet I was calling you—"

With his arms around her, half carrying her, he urged her across that devil's playroom—but the moment they crossed the threshold disaster swept down upon them.

OUT of the corner of his eye Kenneth saw the dark shape looming up behind him at the very instant that the girl shrieked and gripped his arm with clutching fingers. He could not whirl, could not move, before a bludgeon crashed down on his skull with stunning force just as the girl was torn from him.

That blow seemed to split his skull. Sickening waves of agony swept through him as he dropped to the floor. Doggedly he tried to get to his feet, but his legs would not support him, his arm was unable to reach for the gun in his coat pocket. Over him loomed a man who looked like a giant, a man who seized him by the shoulders and pinned him to the floor, held him there while the old woman, Hetty, jabbed a hypodermic needle into his arm and pressed down on the plunger.

Almost immediately his strength ebbed, and in a few minutes his body was a heavy, sodden thing over which he had no control; a thing of livid agony that he could do nothing to ease.

"Into Homer's room with him," the hag ordered, and the big man grabbed him by the back of the neck, dragged him across the threshold into that chamber of horrors.

Not until they were under the brighter lights of the imbecile's torture room did Keneth get a good look at his captor. A husky fellow he was, with a close-clipped beard and bushy eyebrows that poked out from under the greasy brim of a weather-beaten felt hat. A countryman, by his overalls and denim jacket. A strong man who lifted him with ease and stretched him out on a gore-stained kitchen table.

Behind him, the old woman held the girl, one arm twisted up cruelly behind her back; but her gleaming eyes were fixed on Kenneth. The moment he was on the table Hetty yielded her captive to the eager hands of the bearded yokel—and Ken saw the fellow's arms go around her, saw her forced to submit to his mauling as his eyes appreciatively swept over her lovely body.

Like a vengeful witch, the old woman hovered over the table and gloated down at him while her taloned fingers ripped the clothing from him. With a malignant leer she snatched up the knife that had put an end to Homer's mad career and held it in front of his eyes.

"No, you can't move," she jeered, as she read in his eyes the fearful struggle he was waging to lift himself upright. "You can't move a muscle. But you can hear and see and feel—and you can understand what I am going to do to you! You can watch while I let the life-blood out of you—while I take you apart and cut the dirty heart out of you!"

As she spoke she lifted one of his hands and drove the knife into his wrist; then the other wrist, and his ankles one after the other. Each thrust was a searing agony, and then Kenneth could feel the blood stirring in his arteries, could feel it trickling out of the wounds—*and he knew that she was draining his body like a corpse about to be embalmed!*

THE girl's eyes were great pools of indescribable horror as she stared at that barbarous performance. Incoherently, her words hardly intelligible between her sobs, she begged for his life, begged to be allowed to take his place on the table.

"Don't worry—your turn will come soon enough!" the frenzied hag snarled at her.

"But nobody will take this one's place. His miserable life is forfeit for shedding the blood of my helpless son. My only regret is that there is a limit to the pain I can make him suffer!

"You, Mr. Clever Detective," she poised the knife over Kenneth's face, "you were so anxious to learn all about our business. Now I am going to show you just how it operates. I am going to show you just how we transport the drugs you have been so anxious to seize—and I am going to use *you* to deliver a prize shipment for us!"

Helplessly Kenneth Driscoll stared up at the bloodstained blade that would soon be sheathed in his own flesh. Already he could feel its point jabbing into his throat, could hear it ripping through the cartilage and bones of his chest. She was going to disembowel him alive, was going to tear the organs out of his still pulsating body—and he was utterly powerless to so much as lift a hand in self-defense . . .

The ugly blade lowered, hovered for a moment above his taut throat—and then it bit into his skin, sank deeper into his flesh!

This was the end. After that blade laid open the full length of his torso there would be no salvation for him should miraculous rescuers come to his aid. And now it was sinking deeper, was starting to shear its way downward—

But that was more than Dorothy Cooper could endure. Suddenly she wrenched herself out of the bearded man's arms and flung herself at the harridan, grabbed old Hetty's arm and pulled the knife clear of the bloodied wound. Desperately she fought to seize the weapon, to drive the savage murderess back from her prey.

Silently Kenneth's eyes applauded her, but he knew that her gallant attempt was hopeless. Her captor was after her instantly, was on her with a bound; and

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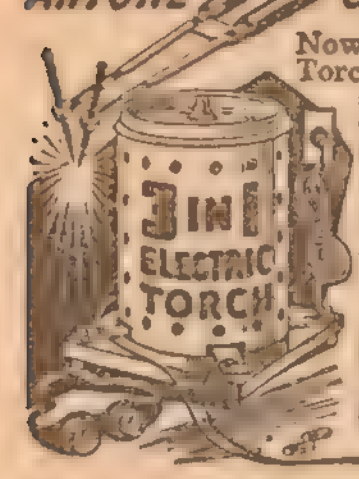

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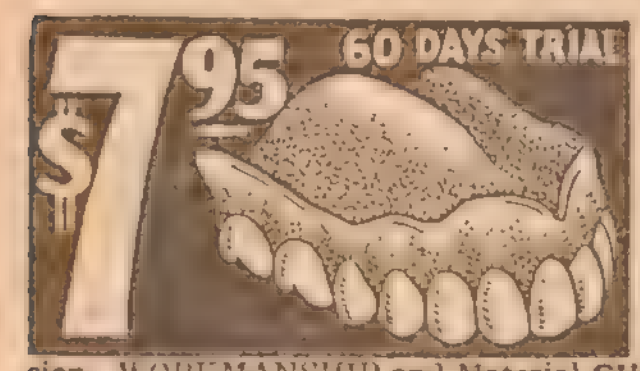

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now he took no more chances with her. Grabbing her swollen wrists, he again lashed the rope securely around them and hoisted her where the imbecile Homer had had her suspended.

"There—that's better," he gritted. "Now you can get a much better view of what is going on!"

Utter despair stamped the girl's face, and tears ran down her cheeks; tears not for herself but for him, Kenneth knew—and that realization made dying even harder. Now, when he had found the one person of whom he had always dreamed, life was indeed sweet—and now life for him was ended . . .

"Yes, Mr. Wise Guy," the bearded husky echoed the hag's taunting, "you're going to have your belly so stuffed with coke that it will spill out of your mouth—and then you're going to take a nice long ride in a private car. We could send you to Boston or Philly or Pittsburgh or a dozen other towns—but the Seamans will appreciate you more down in little old New York. Give our regards to the boys!

"All right, Hetty," he gave the word—and the crone's bloody knife resumed its murderous task.

CHAPTER SIX

The Dope Trail

KENNETH DRISCOLL'S eyes felt as if they were popping out of his head. His face was beaded with perspiration, and his will strove mightily to move his paralyzed limbs—but not a muscle would respond. If only the hag would plunge the knife into his chest it would be all over, but she had no intention of releasing him from his agony. Deliberately, with diabolical slowness, she drove the point inward until the blade rasped against bone.

So this was to be death . . . Not lying in a bed, not crouching behind a blazing

gun as he often had expected it would come—but stretched out helplessly beneath the fiendish hands of a blood-thirsty murderess . . . .

A score of thoughts and faces flashed into his mind at that ultimate moment. Joe Logan, almost cut in two by the blast of a tommy-gun—Frank Driscoll, a mangled heap in the bottom of a telephone booth—Owen Haller, toppling to the oil-soaked floor of the Seaman garage; victims of the dope ring, all three of them. And now to them would be added the corpse of Kenneth Driscoll, broken T-man, drafted even in death to serve the foul ends of the narcotics peddlers . . .

He had the answer to the dope mystery now—and he would die with it. He and the girl who in a few short hours had come to mean more to him than anyone else in the world; for he knew that these fiends could not afford to allow her to survive as a witness against them. After he was gone, after his dope-packed body had been lifted from that table and laid out in a coffin, it would be her turn.

She would be stretched out on that table, and the hag's merciless knife would sink into her white throat, would drive down into the softness of her young flesh.

That excruciating agony stabbing into every cell of his body—it was not the work of the hag's knife. It was not in his chest but in his heart, where the vision of that sweet girl's helpless suffering stabbed more deeply than any steel blade ever could reach.

Her sobs were his benediction, her pitying gaze his dying accolate—but suddenly her eyes widened; incredible hope flashed into them! Her lips parted in startled amazement—and Kenneth caught the sound to which his tortured consciousness had been deaf. Footsteps running across the porch, pounding through the living room!

The bearded man heard them at the same instant. He whirled and sprang toward the door—but before he could reach it a short, broad-shouldered figure charged in from the corridor. John Rickert! Kenneth could hardly believe his eyes—but there was no mistaking the doughty T-man chieftain. His eyes were narrowed to slits, his mouth a grim line beneath his wide, flat nose. Momentarily he stood hunched like a wrestler there in the doorway—and then he leaped, his gun roaring as he shot a hastily snatched automatic out of the big fellow's hand.

That leap launched him right on top of his man, locked him with the bearded husky while his gun barrel beat a tattoo on the fellow's skull. Hetty's ally was staggering backward, was toppling, going down—but the old woman realized his danger. With a catlike bound she sped from Kenneth's side, the bloody-bladed knife raised to plunge into John Rickert's back!

Kenneth Driscoll suffered all the tortures of the damned in that moment. There, before his eyes, his and the girl's only hope of salvation was to be blotted out—and he could not raise a finger to prevent it, could not even shout a warning! Viciously the knife arched downward, while his whole body tried to shriek an alarm—

But his warning was not needed. Suddenly a pink-white figure flashed before his eyes. The girl's upraised arms, still tied together at the wrists, came down—and the hag's head was imprisoned in a noose of soft flesh, was yanked backward before she could drive home her deadly blade. Dropped to the floor when her captor released the rope that suspended her, the girl had acted with split-second promptness; had offered her own body as a sheath for that hungry knife!

That was all the respite John Rickert needed. His automatic smashed down with a final blow that wrought strange havoc in his opponent's face, and then he whirled—to bring the weapon down

on Hetty's skull just as her slashing knife opened a crimson gash in the girl's naked thigh . . .

Within a few minutes Rickert had cut loose the girl's wrists so that she could put on her clothing, had securely tied the old woman's wrists and ankles with the rope from the pulley. Then he lifted Kenneth from the table, propped him up in a chair and bound his wounds with bandages torn from Hetty's garments.

"You will be okay in a little while," he reassured as he massaged the lifeless arms. "Nothing but a temporary paralysis —and we have caught the bleeding before it became dangerous. Just sit quiet and take it easy for a while—"

But Kenneth hardly heard him. Control of his muscles was slowly returning, but he hardly noticed even that. His eyes were fixed in utter astonishment on the dead face of the bearded man—the face of the man who *had been bearded!* Now part of the hairy covering had been ripped away by the slashing gun-muzzle; it dangled grotesquely from one side of the face. The fellow's hat had fallen off, and his upturned features—were those of Owen Haller!

Owen Haller, Frank Driscoll's T-man partner, bearded and cleverly made up, disguised as a countryman!

WHEN the eastern end of the valley began to brighten with the first rays of the new day's sun, the T-men were in complete control of the Wenzel Sanitarium. Dr. Kurt Wenzel and seven of his attendants were in handcuffs. Lined up beside them were Augie Seaman and his henchmen from New York, and Hughie Roeder and his fellow-thug, from Boston. Only old Hetty was missing when John Rickert looked over his catch in the sanitarium office—and Hetty was locked in a cell, where she shrieked obscene curses and raved her defiance.

Sullen-faced and battered, the prisoners listened contemptuously while the men whom they had thought to be their chief broke down and abjectly begged for mercy.

"It was not my fault—I could not help myself—I was dragged into all this without my knowledge," Wenzel babbled. "I ran a respectable sanitarium here until about a year and a half ago. That was when Hetty Haller came here with her son, Homer. She wanted me to treat him, but there was little I could do for him; he was not a violent case—just an imbecile who was subject to convulsive seizures.

"She said that my treatments were greatly improving his condition—said I was the only psychiatrist who had been able to help him—so she moved into a cottage nearby so that she could bring him to me regularly. But she was badly in need of money. That was how she came to tell me that she was a licensed embalmer; she offered to do the work whenever her services were required here at the sanitarium.

"I did not know what I was getting into when I agreed—I swear it! I did not know until three or four months later—and then it was too late. Then she had set up her complete organization and was shipping out drugs in every body she embalmed—"

"And then you started helping her by providing corpses until your supply of patients was exhausted," Rickert cut in grimly.

"I could not help myself," Wenzel whimpered. "Her gangsters had moved in here and displaced my attendants. I had to do as they told me—or they would have killed me and handed my body to her!"

"When the supply of corpse material here ran out, Hetty set up a disorderly house for her sister in Boston," Rickert continued. "It was really a trap for homeless and friendless women, a clearing house for girls whose disappearance would

not be noticed. Your cousin fell into it, Miss Cooper—and evidently she was forced to write a letter inviting you to come and live with her when they learned that you were alone in the world.

"Boston is where most of the victims came from, and their bodies were shipped as far west as Cleveland and as far south as Baltimore. The narcotics were flown in here from Canada and then delivered to undertaking establishments that were working in league with that gang of murderous cutthroats!"

"Undertaking establishments!" A sudden light dawned upon Kenneth Driscoll. "*That* was what Frank tried to tell me! He started to tell me that Augie Seaman had been distributing the stuff through his brother's—That was as far as he got. His voice ended in a gasp that sounded like the first syllable of 'garage.' I jumped at that conclusion and never thought of Maurice Seaman's undertaking establishment!"

"Exactly," John Rickert nodded. "When Haller heard what you thought he quickly rigged up a trap for you in the Seaman garage and led you into it. He was the real head of the outfit, using his position as a government man to enlist the gangsters as his distributors and then to protect them by putting on the spot any of our men who came too close to the truth. He was doing famously—until he tangled with the Driscolls.

"That was what tripped him up, Kenneth—the Driscolls," he smiled tightly. "I had a hunch that something was wrong with Haller last night. Why? Because Frank made his report to you instead of to the office. Frank Driscoll was not a man to disregard regulations; he called you because he suspected Haller's crookedness. He was afraid that if he called the office he would not be able to get that last desperate message past his own partner.

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5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
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"Man, you weren't a moment too soon!" Kenneth sighed. "A few minutes more—"

But Dorothy Cooper's hand, stealing into his, left the rest of that grim speculation unvoiced on his lips.

John Rickert watched shrewdly.

"You're wasting your time with that detective agency of yours, Ken," he offered significantly. "A lad like you ought to be with the T-men. Why don't you come down and see me in the morning? We need a Driscoll—the Driscolls," he amended with a twinkle in his eye, "in the service!"

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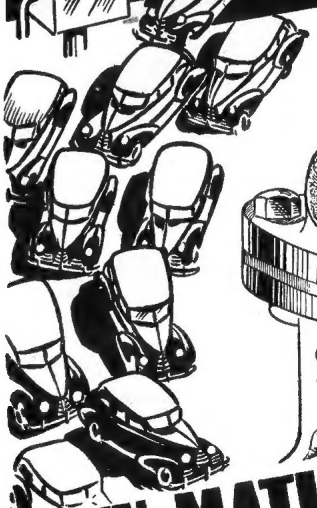

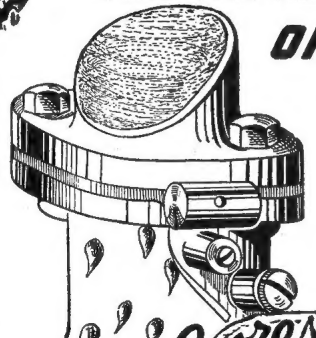

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